

Can Obama Break Turkey's EU Impasse?

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Brief Analysis

Europeans watched nervously during the December 2008 Russian-Ukrainian crisis, wondering whether Russia might cut off gas supplies to them as well. This situation was yet another illustration of the potential benefits of Turkey's accession to the European Union, since Turkey could serve as an alternate route for oil and gas from Caspian basin energy fields. Nonetheless, Turkey's accession talks are stalled, with major European states, including France, unwilling to open the path for Ankara's membership; furthermore, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has lost its appetite for the process. Although the situation appears bleak, President Obama should try to impel the two sides toward agreement, as Turkey's EU accession would also be a strategic gain for the United States.

Turkey's Membership Process Begins

Turkey became a candidate for EU membership in 1999 and initiated significant reforms toward this goal under the 1999-2002 coalition government that comprised the Democratic Left Party (DSP), the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and the Motherland Party (ANAP).

Despite being rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, which traditionally maintained a strong anti-European stance, the AKP catapulted to power in the 2002 elections, partially as a result of their pro-EU policy, a product of the AKP's effort to remake itself out of the ashes of its predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party. Following in the footsteps of the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition, the AKP launched aggressive reforms soon after, qualifying Turkey for EU accession talks in 2004.

Where Things Stand

After Turkey began EU membership talks in 2005, objections from some EU states, including vehement opposition by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, stalled the talks. Paris's hostility toward Turkish accession led to the freezing of four of the thirty-five negotiating chapters. Meanwhile, at the insistence of Greek Cypriots, the Union froze seven other chapters, punishing Ankara for not opening up its ports to Greek Cypriot commercial shipping. An additional chapter on agriculture remains closed due to both French and Greek Cypriot objections.

In the meantime, Turkey has opened ten negotiating chapters with the EU, but so far has been able to complete only one -- science and research -- primarily because the EU has established strict benchmarks for Turkey and because France, Austria, and some other EU countries object to the closing of chapters. Moreover, Turkey's internal reform process has slowed considerably since 2005, weakening Ankara's allies in the EU, such as Sweden, and nearly halting the accession process.

In sum, twelve negotiating chapters remain unopened, ten are open but stalled, and the remainder show no signs of progress. Turkey is fast running out of chapters on which to negotiate and its EU accession increasingly looks like a political dream. The science and research chapter, the only chapter completed, consists of one and a half pages. The EU's legislation, known as *acquis communautaire*, which Ankara has to negotiate and adopt before it can become a member, is over 120,000 pages.

Ankara Cools to Accession

The AKP has often seemed to take a tactical view of EU accession. The party pursued EU membership until accession talks opened in 2005. Until that time, the AKP's EU accession policy had little domestic cost, but gained the party much in terms of international legitimacy as a pro-EU (therefore non-Islamist) party. However, once Turkey started accession talks, and the economic and political cost of EU reforms became apparent, the AKP pulled back from the EU process, judging the benefits of a cool attitude toward the EU to outweigh those of membership.

In addition to the AKP's calculation regarding the domestic political cost of unpopular reforms required for EU accession, the party's appetite for Europe waned for two other reasons. The EU membership objections to Turkish accession angered the AKP leadership, making them even less eager to pursue this path. In addition, the European Court of Human Rights' 2005 decision to uphold Turkey's ban on Islamic-style headscarves (turbans) on college campuses upset the AKP. The AKP had hoped that Europe would help it recalibrate Turkey's powerful secular norms by allowing more religious freedom. The court's decision suggested that Europe is content with Turkish secularism as it is. A symbolic sign of the AKP's loss of interest in the EU was the AKP's declaring 2005 the "Year of Africa," opting to focus the country's attention at a crucial juncture on a continent other than Europe.

The EU Sours on Turkey

The Turkish-EU impasse is rooted as much in the EU states' objections to Turkish membership as it is in the AKP's uneven commitment; decelerating reforms in Turkey since 2005 have raised eyebrows in the EU. Recently, the AKP appointed a new minister responsible for EU accession and also passed the Third

National Program, a document the EU requires from countries in accession talks outlining goals for further EU reforms. However, since Turkey is yet to complete 40 percent of its Second National Program, it is unclear how much these new efforts will invigorate Turkey's EU process.

Turkey's gradual slide away from European values is also troubling to Europeans. News reports and various indices on media freedom and gender equality in the country testify to this slip. For instance, in April 2007, the AKP passed a new internet law banning YouTube, making Turkey the only European country to deny access to this popular website. The position of women in Turkey is also problematic. According to the UN Development Programme's gender empowerment index, Turkey, which was ranked 63 in 2002, has dropped to 90 today, falling behind even Saudi Arabia. The World Economic Forum's gender gap report shows a similarly startling slip, from 105 in 2002 to 123 in 2008 out of 130 countries ranked.

Policy Suggestions

Based on both European and Turkish attitudes, the chances for Turkish EU accession appear bleak. Moreover, Turkey faces an EU review by year's end in which Brussels might issue new sanctions against Ankara or even freeze accession talks over Turkey's failure to normalize relations with Greek Cypriots. What is more, French objections to Turkish membership remain in place, and one challenge for President Obama is to convince French President Sarkozy to allow Turkey's membership to move forward.

Such challenges notwithstanding, if Turkey slips away from European values even as it negotiates for EU membership, it will doom its own chances to join the Union. At this stage, U.S. policy should be centered on damage control. Washington (and Brussels) should send the right message to their potential strategic partner in Turkey, outlining a vision for a European Turkey that includes gender equality, media freedom, separation of powers, religious freedom, and separation of "mosque and state." Although ultimately it is up to the Turks to elect the kind of government they want, Brussels and Washington can and should expect Ankara to promote these European values if Turkey is to remain on the EU path. Turkey will not become a true liberal democracy until it is held to genuine European standards and led by a government that sees EU accession as a strategic goal, not a political tactic.

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