

# Why Europe Needs Turkey

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**O**n October 6, the European Union issued its much anticipated report evaluating Turkey's accession prospects. The report said that Ankara satisfies the union's membership rules sufficiently to begin accession talks. However, the report also suggested a special track for talks with Turkey, one with no promise of membership. This sets Turkey apart from all other candidate countries for which accession talks have been close ended.

Most Europeans would not find this attitude troublesome. After all, common wisdom is that the EU does not need Ankara. Turkey is undesirable because it is large and Muslim. Nothing could be more short-sighted: Europe needs Turkey precisely for these reasons. With its young, secular-minded population, the Turkish democracy offers a solution to Europe's twin dilemmas, an aging population and a restless immigrant community of mostly Arab, radical Muslims whose numbers are growing exponentially. For its own sake, the EU needs to bring Ankara into the union.

So far, the Turks have put forth a brave face toward the EU's treatment of them. Europe's recent decision, for instance, has been hailed a diplomatic victory in Ankara. Yet, Turkey's EU accession is by no means a done deal. First, there is the possibility that the union's final decision in December, which will take into account the recent report, will create a separate accession track for Ankara, along with a laundry list of Turkey-specific reform requirements.

To be sure, there is room for continued political reform in Turkey. Yet, even European bureaucrats admit that Ankara satisfies the EU's accession rules, "existence of rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights," at least as much as some of the EU countries. Sooner or later, most Turks will catch up with the fact that Brussels expects Ankara to become perfect, while it is sufficient for other countries to simply be good to join the EU. Brussels will find glitches in Turkey as long as it keeps looking for them, which only increases the chances of anti-EU backlash in Turkey once the current euphoria dies down and the EU's wavering attitude falls onto the Turks' radar screen.

A second impediment ahead of Turkey's membership is internal European politics. Although the governments in France and Germany, the two most powerful nations in the EU, are supportive of Ankara's bid, today there is powerful opposition in both countries against Turkey's accession. This is fed first and foremost by a backlash toward Muslim immigrants. It is unfortunate that many Europeans fail to see that Turks are "western Muslims" who better acclimatize to Europe than most other Muslim immigrants.

A comparison between France, whose Muslim community is mostly North African, and Germany, whose Muslim community is mostly Turkish, makes this case. The heavily disenfranchised North African Muslim community in France is the hotbed of radical Islam in the EU. Meanwhile, though the Turks in Germany are not quite fully assimilated into mainstream society, fundamentalist Islam has failed to take roots among them.

Another concern that feeds opposition to Turkish membership is a fear that this will bring Europe closer to the turmoil of the Middle East. The fact is the EU will become a true actor in Middle East politics, and have a say in shaping the peace, only after it takes in a country from that region. Another benefit of Turkey's accession is that this would give the EU access to the rich energy resources in the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia. Without Turkey, the EU is at best a regional club. With Turkey, it is in the running to become a powerful global player.

For sure, many Europeans will continue to have difficulty in seeing the strategic wisdom of Turkey's membership. After all, most Europeans would rather stay away from the Middle East, but the fact is that sooner or later Europeans will need to take a closer look at their Middle Eastern neighbors. Birthrates are so low in Europe that the EU population, currently at 455 million, will shrink by at least 25 million by 2050. What is worse, the EU will age dramatically: in 2050 nearly one third of Europeans will be dependant population over 65, siphoning off funds from European welfare states. On the other hand the Turkish population, which is at 70 million today, will jump to 97 million in 2050. More importantly, this will be a young population, with a low dependency rate of 10-15 percent.

Turkey's membership is the panacea for Europe's demographic demise and the impending failure of the famed welfare states. It is also Europe's best investment in "western Islam." The sooner the Europeans come to these conclusions, the easier it will become for them to think about a European Turkey. Europe might well survive without Ankara, but with Turkey in its ranks, it has a chance to excel.

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