

European Union Suggests Turkey Is Not Quite Ready: A Window of Opportunity for the United States

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Brief Analysis

On October 6, the European Union (EU) Commission, the executive arm of the EU, issued its report on Turkey's progress toward satisfying the Copenhagen Criteria, the union's membership rules that mandate "rule of law, institutions guaranteeing democracy, and respect for minorities." Although the commission praised Turkey's dramatic reform efforts since 1999, it stopped short of suggesting a date for accession negotiations with Ankara. This represents a departure from established traditions -- apparently only for Turkey, since the commission also reviewed Croatia's candidacy, suggesting a 2005 date for accession talks with that country. In another departure from tradition -- accession talks are normally only close-ended -- the report stated that any negotiations with Ankara "would be open-ended" and that their "outcome cannot be guaranteed." Finally, the report suggested that Turkey further improve its democracy, leaving the final decision on Ankara's membership to the December 17 meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, the union's highest decisionmaking body.

Even if Turkish democracy may have room for improvement, Turkey's record is not any less perfect than that of some EU member or candidate countries. Ankara's positive reception of the EU report is simply the Turks' way of putting a brave face on Brussels's decision not to award Ankara a definite date for talks, which sets Turkey apart from all other countries that have sought EU membership. Once the euphoria in Turkey quiets down, this troubling EU attitude is likely to stir up resentment against Brussels. That would be a window of opportunity that the United States might use to win back the Turkish public, which is more pro-European and anti-American today than ever before.

Background: EU Assessment of Turkish Democracy

The EU report suggests that in order to fully satisfy the Copenhagen Criteria, Turkey needs to work on the following issues (among others):

- Freedom of religious belief: "Although freedom of religious belief is . . . largely unhampered . . . non-Muslim religious communities continue to experience difficulties."
- Protection of minorities: Although there has been "greater tolerance for the expression of Kurdish culture in different forms . . . there are still considerable restrictions, particularly in the area of broadcasting."

How Does Turkey Compare to Other EU Members and Candidates?

Turkey may indeed have a less than perfect democratic record. If Brussels looks for glitches in Ankara's implementation of the Copenhagen Criteria, it will surely find them, including in the areas listed above. Yet, the EU should keep in mind that even its member states do not implement the criteria uniformly, nor are they always in full compliance with them.

Religious freedom. Certain EU member states, such as Greece, have serious shortcomings regarding religious freedom. According to the U.S. State Department's 2003 Religious Freedom Report, while immigrant and native Muslims constitute nearly 8 percent of Greece's population, they do not have a mosque in Athens, where more than 100,000 Muslims live. And an effort since 2000 to build the city's first official mosque has been blocked by the powerful Greek Orthodox Church.

Faiths other than Islam also face discrimination in Greece. Article 13 of the Greek constitution states, "All known religions shall be free and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered," adding, however, that "the practice of rites of worship is not allowed to offend public order." The government has used this clause to clamp down on the religious freedoms of the non-Greek Orthodox. In May 1993, following the highly publicized Kokkinakis case (in which two Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted of proselytism and sentenced to four months in prison), the European Court of Human Rights condemned Greece for "allowing the flagrant intervention of political, administrative, and ecclesiastical authorities in the exercise of religious worship."

Respect for minorities. Broadcasting rights in minority languages is one EU yardstick for measuring "respect for minorities." Turkey currently has three hours of public television and four hours of radio broadcasting per week in the country's six most widely used minority languages, including Kurdish. While this is limited, it is better than what minority linguistic communities in some EU member states receive. For instance, of the five most widely used minority languages in Greece, four -- Macedonian, Albanian, Bulgarian (Pomak), and Vlach (Aroumanian) -- are banned from broadcasting; Turkish is the exception.

Another example of noncompliance with the Copenhagen Criteria is found in Slovakia. According to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Roma, who constitute 7 percent of Slovakia's population, face widespread discrimination in education, health care, employment, and access to public services. Data from 2003 indicates that the mortality rate for Roma children is three times that of the majority population, while Roma life expectancy is lower by almost seventeen years. Moreover, because of their lack of proficiency in the Slovak language, Roma children are disproportionately placed in special schools for the mentally disabled. Roma also face population-control measures. In January 2003, the Center for Reproductive Rights, a Slovak nongovernmental organization, reported 110 cases of forced sterilization of Roma women.

Is the EU Fair toward Turkey?

The EU does not appear to expect full implementation of the Copenhagen Criteria from any country but Turkey. For example, the EU admitted Slovakia to membership in May 2004, despite the fact that its November 2003 Regular Report on Slovakia declared that the Roma community faces "social inequalities, exclusion and widespread discrimination," and that "the gap between the good policy formulation and its implementation on the spot hasn't significantly diminished." Brussels should evaluate Ankara's efforts to implement the Copenhagen Criteria with the same flexibility. What matters is that, pursuant to the recent reforms, Turkey has proven itself a liberal democracy that respects the spirit of the criteria at least as much as do Slovakia, Greece, and several other EU countries.

A Chance to Reverse Anti-Americanism in Turkey?

Many Turks may view the above developments as proof that the union has a double standard, and this view will intensify if such inequities are reflected in the EU Council of Ministers' decision in December. That would provide a

window of opportunity for the United States. There are two likely steps that Washington can take, together with a well-crafted public diplomacy campaign, to reverse this tide of anti-Americanism in Turkey:

- **Cyprus.** Washington could initiate policies to end the isolation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), currently recognized only by Turkey. Humanitarian and economic measures ranging from direct flights to offering aid to the TRNC would be received very well by the Turks, who feel abandoned by the EU on the Cyprus issue. (In UN-sponsored referenda on April 24, 2004, 65 percent of Turkish Cypriots voted to unify the island and 76 percent of Greek Cypriots rejected compromise. The EU, which admitted the Greek-majority government of Cyprus into its membership, has done little since then to ease the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots.)
- **PKK.** The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a notorious terrorist group with more than 5,000 militants in northern Iraq, resumed fresh attacks on Turkey in June 2004, causing many casualties. The PKK is currently the biggest psychological threat to Turkey. Although the United States has promised action against the group's presence in northern Iraq, so far it has done nothing. At this stage, any sort of action, including the elimination of the captains of this leader-driven group, would be well received in Turkey.

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