

## **Turkey and the EU: The Consequences of a Stalled Process**

Talking Points for CSIS Roundtable

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Let us note at the outset, Turkey's EU accession process has stalled. Nonetheless the EU - more specifically, the EU Commission which has the responsibility to conduct negotiations on behalf of the EU - constantly reiterates that there is an ongoing process destined to eventually take Turkey into the EU while the Turkish government reaffirms its own commitment even as it complains about the failure to make progress.

Processes are of course not an end in themselves. They are by their nature designed to reach a declared objective. However, like the Middle East Peace process which never quite reaches its destination, and with Turkey's EU process still very far from its objective, it increasingly seems as if its perpetuation has become an end in itself not just for EU Commission and Turkey but also for successive US administrations which have supported Turkish accession.

We are all familiar with the dismal picture. Not only does Turkey's EU odyssey stretch back more than five decades to 1959, since the accession process finally began over six years ago, things have barely moved. Of the 35 chapters, only 13 have been opened and 18 have been blocked, eight because of the intractable Cyprus problem, five for various reasons by France and five more by the Greek Cypriots. None has been opened during the current Hungarian presidency, none was opened under the previous Belgian presidency and the last one was opened back in June 2010.

So how is Turkey, or more accurately the current Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, which inherited an ongoing effort to satisfy the EU's political criteria for membership when it won elections in November 2002 and then successfully pushed ahead with them to begin accession negotiations reacting to this impasse? Clearly, its mood is one of exasperation. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent op-ed in Newsweek is indicative of the government's attitude. After highlighting Turkey's economic performance and contrasting it with that of the EU countries and its active foreign policy, which he argued would expand the

EU's geostrategic reach, Erdogan then asked whether 'Turkey's power' was in fact an impediment to Turkey's accession.

To be sure, as Turkey's foreign policy objectives have widened and expanded under the current government, it is understandably less willing to settle for a low level status in the EU similar to that of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania at the southeastern edge of the EU. In essence, what Erdogan and his party clearly prefer is a strategic partnership with the EU, similar to the one Turkey had with the US during the Cold War, which would allow it to pursue the close relationships it has developed outside the EU with Russia and Iran, particularly in the energy field, as well as with the Arab world where it has been assiduously raising its profile.

It would be fair to argue that Turkey wants to enter the EU on its own terms like the UK in the 1960's. The UK had then indicated a preference to retain its special relationship with the US and to a lesser extent with the Commonwealth even after entering the EU, as Turkey now wants to retain its own special relationships with countries and regions outside the EU. Just like the British, the Turks argue that this would bring benefits to the EU. Consequently, the failure of the EU, as they see it, to recognize the advantages of such a partnership has disappointed and exasperated Erdogan and his government.

Needless to say, the Turkish leaders are conscious of the fact that in addition to Turkey's size, huge population and the geographic location of most its landmass beyond Europe, all of which would necessitate a redefinition by the EU of itself in order to admit their country, Islam is also a major and perhaps even a defining negative factor. This is particularly irksome to the JDP as it has its roots in the Islamist movement in Turkey which consistently called the EU 'a Christian Club.' However, as the JDP government has been making efforts to loosen some of the stricter aspects of secularism in Turkey parallel to its efforts to enter the EU, it has inevitably exacerbated existing European fears about Turkish membership making relations with Euro-Islam even more difficult. This certainly appears to be the case with the current leaders in Paris and Berlin who have, as a result, earned the public ire of Ankara.

The use of the Cyprus problem to effectively block progress is also deeply offensive to the Turkish government as it had encouraged the Turkish Cypriots to vote 'yes' in a referendum on a

UN peace plan in 2004 to solve and thus take Cyprus out of the EU equation. The Cyprus issue is certainly very useful to European opponents of Turkey's EU process who can avoid all the other controversial arguments by sticking to a legalistic line and saying that Turkey's failure to implement the Ankara Protocol is sufficient reason to block Turkey's EU process. One could even argue that if the Cyprus problem did not exist, it would have been invented by Turkey's EU opponents.

Egemen Bagis, the Minister for the EU, recently said that if forced to choose between the EU and Cyprus, Turkey would always choose Cyprus. This comment, along with all other recent negative statements about the EU may just be part of the JDP's pre-election rhetoric designed to appeal to Turkish nationalists, but also reflects genuine exasperation that fewer than a million Greek Cypriots backed by cynical European leaders are able to frustrate Turkey's grand EU aspirations.

Clearly, things will not move far or fast on Turkish accession in the near future. However, while Erdogan has been saying that "we are approaching a turning point in Turkey- EU relations," it seems unlikely that the Turkish government will make a unilateral break with the EU if it retains power after the June elections because it is not in its interest to do so.

The reality is that the EU process has been invaluable to the JDP government since it came into office over eight years ago. To begin with, the process allowed it to win over many of the Turkish skeptics who had argued that a JDP government would take Turkey away from the West while simultaneously undermining its secular political opponents who claimed that only they could begin accession negotiations. At the same time, it enhanced efforts to attract foreign capital into Turkey to sustain recovery and growth after the economic crisis of 2000-2001 which had helped usher the JDP into power.

Equally importantly, the process facilitated the readjustment of civilian-military relations which cut down the power of the military and its ability to influence Turkish defense and foreign policies as well as domestic politics. The current investigations into alleged coup plots, for example, have been justified on the grounds of helping to refashion the country into one in which coups will be as unthinkable as in EU countries.

Erdogan has been talking about a new constitution which would be drawn up after the elections. This would be easier to push through if there is an ongoing EU process. It is worth noting that the recent constitutional amendments bringing changes to the judicial system which were approved in a referendum were justified with reference to the EU.

In short, there is little to be gained by the Turkish government in ending the frustrating EU process and this is confirmed by the fact that both Erdogan and Bagis have been challenging the EU to 'pull the plug itself' if it so chose. They fully recognize that the opponents of Turkey in the EU who have stalled the process cannot find the 27 votes necessary to formally end it. So while 60 percent of Turks are convinced that Turkey will not enter the EU and Turkey faces the very real prospect of becoming the first country to begin accession negotiations but ultimately fail to get in, Turkey's EU accession odyssey continues.