

Turkey's European Dilemma

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Turkey is on Europe's edge. In the last decade, the country has struggled with whether to join the European Union (EU) or focus its diplomatic efforts elsewhere. During this period, Turkish public opinion has swung back and forth. While a slim margin currently favors EU membership, both elite opinion and public sentiment remains volatile, particularly with so much changing within Turkey itself. This is because Turkey's European dilemma is no longer one of mere foreign policy but also concerns the future shape of Turkey itself.

Although Turkey's relationship with European integration goes back to the late 1950s, the nature of this relationship began to change in the last decade. In 1999, the EU granted Turkey candidate country status. In the run up to and the aftermath of this decision, Turkey's Europeanization gained pace. The 2001 economic crisis created an opening not only for the financial and economic reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund but also the political reforms demanded by the EU. During this period, Turkey amended its constitution several times to improve human rights, strengthen the rule of law, and restructure democratic institutions. Although problems with implementation remain, the prevailing view is that Turkey has come a long way toward meeting European standards.

In the last year or so, however, many in Turkey have grown increasingly disenchanted with the Europeanization project. This disenchantment derives in part from the destabilizing effects of large-scale change. But it has also to do with how some within Turkey have portrayed the reform process as part of a Western strategy aimed at dismembering the country and/or watering down its secularism in order to render the country a better model for other "Muslim" societies to emulate in advancing a "Greater Middle East." The U.S.-led war on Iraq, which was justified on these grounds and made it possible (albeit in an unintended way) for Kurdish separatists to use the region as a base to launch attacks inside Turkey, provided more ammunition to those who produce such conspiracy theories. Also presented as evidence have been the discouraging remarks by some EU politicians regarding the futility of Turkey's efforts to Europeanize given its lack of "Europeanness" and the increasing pressure on Turkey to identify the killings of Armenians during World War I as "genocide."

Given these perceptions of a West that is "out to get" Turkey, public opinion began to withdraw from its previously staunch pro-EU position. While anti-Westernism has risen as a result, such sentiments have not (yet) taken the form of calls for a turn away from Turkey's Western orientation.

The Great Divide within Turkey

In the early years of Turkey's relations with the project of European integration, the Turkish elite sought membership as the next stage in Turkey's development and

Westernization. At the time, the European Community was considered the economic wing of NATO. Turkey expected that joining another Western institution would bolster its efforts at being/becoming Western. Second, the economic dimension of membership was (and remains) of enormous significance, leading to the signing of a Customs Agreement that went into effect in 1995. Third, supporters of EU membership were keen to replicate in Turkey the process of rapid development that other candidates and EU members went through when preparing for and after joining the Union.

Of these three, the symbolic importance of locating the country in the West cannot be underestimated. Contrary to popular representations, Turkey's Westernization was never a mere lifestyle choice. Being part of the West was also a strategy to avoid being on the margins of the world political and economic system. Such concerns are rooted in a particular memory of the final days of the Ottoman Empire that traumatized Turkey's elite – the memory of Anatolia turned into a backwater of the world economic system and pushed to the brink of dismemberment. These concerns have been a driving force behind the project of Westernization throughout the republican era.

These concerns also help illuminate the contemporary fault line on EU membership in Turkey. Some in Turkey, including members of the elite who previously spearheaded Westernization efforts, have turned against the European project because they have come to consider the price of admission too high. The transformation of Turkey's polity and politics through Europeanization runs the risk of marginalizing the prevailing elite and their interests. In the attempt to resist such transformation, Turkey's Eurosceptics, a loose coalition of elite and other state and non-state actors whose membership crosscuts class and other divides, have invoked the aforementioned fears. Whereas the European project was portrayed as a solution to Turkey's insecurities in the early republican period, currently it is painted by the Eurosceptics as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Different from the Eurosceptics in some other member or candidate states, who mostly worry about the restrictions over sovereignty imposed by membership, Turkey's Eurosceptics have revved up fears of a return to the past of dismemberment and near-colonization, albeit in a different guise.

Whereas the Eurosceptics are worried about the future becoming like the past, those who seek to Europeanize Turkey fear a future that would be quite unlike the past. They worry about the insecurities generated by the incongruous dynamics of globalization and Turkey's young and growing population. The latter consider Turkey's EU membership as a security policy in itself: a remedy that would help stabilize Turkey's foreign relations, as well as its economy, and provide an anchor for reform. The tangible benefits of the reformist momentum created by the EU's granting of candidate status in 1999 have left little doubt in their minds about the superiority of their own strategy. During this period, Turkey's chronically high inflation rate fell from over 80% to single digits, foreign capital began to pour in, long-promised democratic rights and freedoms were put in place (in spite of continuing problems with safeguarding those rights), and relations with neighbors became more stable.

Secular vs. Fundamentalist?

The reformists' biggest problem is not European public opinion, which remains skeptical about Turkey's place in the EU future. The major obstacle is shaping up to be Turkey's own public, which has increasingly become disenchanted with the European project.

This has not always been the case. During a brief period between 1999 and 2006, Europeanizing Turkey emerged as the only state-sponsored project to enjoy widespread public support. This interlude coincided with aspects of the formerly fundamentalist base in Turkey embracing the Europeanization project as a solution not only to Turkey's economic and political challenges but also their own problems. The former fundamentalists who set up the AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to believe that binding the avowedly secular state elite with the rights and rules of the EU would allow greater freedom for the practice of religion in Turkey – more than the prevailing understandings and practices currently allows. Notwithstanding the more narrow concerns of its own core base, which is under 8%, the AKP was able to gain 34% of the votes in the 2002 elections and form a single-party government by capitalizing on the European aspirations of voters.

The AKP-led reform efforts have delivered concrete economic benefits to many, thereby helping increase the party's popularity among the people. However, the ostensibly conservative-democratic outlook of its formerly fundamentalist cadre has instilled fears in those who view the reform process as challenging the secular and unitary make-up of Turkey's society and institutions. Although the reality of such danger is debatable, the mass secularist rallies held in the spring of 2007 left no doubt as to the reality of people's fears. These mass rallies coincided with the AKP's (now failed) attempt to elect one of its own cadres, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, as president. The failure to elect a president, a process clouded by an e-declaration by the military and a disputed decision by the Constitutional Court, has led Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to call for early elections in July 22.

Contrary to popular representations of the current divide in Turkey as one of "secularist vs. fundamentalist," the struggle between myriad actors is shaped by their competing visions of Turkey's future: inside or outside the EU. The AKP encouraged these rather simplistic interpretations with its awkward handling of Turkey's secularist heritage. Examples of such awkwardness include Turkey's short-lived attempt to criminalize adultery and the prime minister's evident and vocal disappointment with the European Court's confirmation of the Turkish court's ban on women's headscarves in public places. Notwithstanding the AKP leadership's vocal support for secularism as a constitutive principle of the republic, such discomfiture was not reassuring and only fueled the efforts of Turkey's Eurosceptics. Ironically, although the European public fears the possibility of religious backsliding in Turkey and the European Court backed the Turkish court's ban on women's headscarves in public, some in Turkey believe that the EU (together with the United States) is seeking to undermine the country's secular status, as well as its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Looking Ahead

The Turkish public is discontented with Europeanization not only because of the EU's demands for change and the destabilizing nature of the reform process. The Turkish public also demands change. Putting them off the project of Europeanization are the conflicting signals coming from the EU. On the one hand, since 1999 the EU bureaucracy has kept Turkey on track in terms of facilitating negotiations and reform – reforms that became possible thanks to the sacrifices made by both state and non-state actors. On the other hand, some EU politicians have spoken publicly against Turkey's membership, thereby further complicating the job of the reformers. The most recent example is French President Nicholas Sarkozy who, before he was elected, called for rejecting Turkey's bid for the EU. Ironically it is the French leader who knows the dilemmas caused by the need for and fears of change as expressed by his people who has chosen to be so insensitive to the feelings stirred up by similar dynamics in Turkey.

The dynamics of Turkey's relations with the United States and EU in recent years have made it only more evident that Turkey's European dilemma is currently less about its foreign relations and more about domestic politics. Accordingly, foreign policy alternatives to European accession are proposed only to derail Turkey's Europeanization and not as real foreign policy alternatives to alignment with the West. One such alternative is rapprochement with Russia, a country that has so far opted for a less-than-full democracy. Another alternative currently favored by Turkey's Eurosceptics is a grand Eurasian alliance with Russia plus the Central Asian republics and/or Iran. Turkey's "Eurasianists," who are quick to point to the economic potential in such a region, often fail to note that such potential is not likely to be realized if Turkey loses its European perspective. While neither an alliance with Russia or a Eurasian option is a feasible alternative, their real power lies not in the ability to make but to break.

The initial purpose behind Turkey's turn to Europe — i.e. being/becoming Western — no longer tops the priorities of Turkey's reformers. What attracts them are the democratic structures that the EU has made possible. The promise of strengthening Turkey through democratization has brought together the formerly skeptical leftists and former fundamentalists to pursue the project of Europeanization. If they have turned to the European project as a solution to Turkey's problems, a project that remains on track despite all the challenges, it is because the reformist momentum depends on the EU motor. If only Turkey's reformists were able to keep this momentum going on their own.