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Looking towards Europe

Author(s): Ersel Aydinli and Ali Resul Usul

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# Looking Towards Europe



**There has long been a sense of unreality about relations between Turkey and the European Union. While the Turks largely pretended that they would someday enter the Union, the Europeans pretended that they would allow it to happen. Since it was agreed that such a process would require a great deal of time and major changes, both sides were able to avoid the issue. Europeans could avoid truly serious thinking about Turkish membership, believing Turkey would never be able to meet all the necessary requirements. Many Turks avoided thinking about the realities of membership, suspecting the Europeans would never allow it to come true. Now all may have changed.**

**A**FTER THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) accepted Turkey's candidacy for membership at the 1999 Helsinki summit and introduced accession partnership priorities last year, Turkey outlined a national programme to meet the political criteria. Pretending had to end.

For the first time, Turkey had to think seriously about what the criteria meant and the result of complying with them. In the debates that followed, serious reservations were revealed among those in power.

Where did this scepticism come from? In the case of European demands for minority rights, it could be claimed that these are exactly what the Turkish state has been structured to resist. The republic's major goal has always been to create a modern nation state, devoid of minority identities and their political representation.

The doctrine of Kemalism, which is the inspiration of the forces striving to keep the system working, is traditionally based on a theme of unification. This seems directly threatened by European practices that would shift power from the centre to the periphery, from the state to social groups. The inevitable transformation from such changes was probably viewed as self-destruction by those in control.

Despite this, almost miraculously, in August parliament passed a dramatic and wide-ranging set of laws designed to meet European requirements. What do these laws address and how are they being received? How could they be passed despite the reservations?

## LANDMARK REFORMS

By adopting the landmark fourteen-point reform package, parliament has scrapped the death penalty, although in line with the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, it will remain for use in times of war or when conflict threatens. Most significantly, perhaps, this means that Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan and other leading militants will not be executed.

The section of the Turkish penal code relating to crimes against the state has been amended so that the republic, Turkish parliament, government, ministers and security forces can now be criticised, provided they are not insulted.

Non-Muslim minority communities established by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty – Greeks, Armenians and Jews – are allowed greater rights over religious property, such as churches, and greater freedom to satisfy cultural, religious, educational, social and health needs through foundations, provided they receive governmental permission first.

Retrial will become possible for civil and criminal law cases that

**Dr Ersel Aydinli and Ali Resul Usul**  
Dr Ersel Aydinli is in the department of international relations at Bilkent University in Ankara. Ali Resul Usul is a doctoral candidate at the university and acting director of the European research desk at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies in Ankara.

receive approval from the European Court of Human Rights. Under the new law, a Turkish citizen subject to a conviction that the European Court has found to contravene the Convention can force Turkish courts to review their



verdict. However, this amendment will not go into force until a year after publication, so will not apply to past applicants to the European Court.

Kurds and other ethnic groups in Turkey will be allowed to broadcast in their mother tongue, provided they do not violate 'national unity and the principles of the republic.' They will be able to establish language courses. But there is no provision for Kurdish and other minority language teaching in state education, or their use as a medium of instruction.

Arguably the most important aspect of the new package is the official recognition of a Kurdish presence as well as that of other ethnic groups including Laz, Circassians and Arabs. For the first time in modern Turkey the official republican ideology, which previously stated that everyone living in Turkey is Turkish, has been radically altered. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the country's mosaic structure – a legacy of the Ottoman Empire – has been officially acknowledged for the first time.

## IS IT ENOUGH?

The new laws have been praised by many within Turkey and abroad. According to one of the country's leading political commentators, Mehmet Ali Birand, they are 'steps of a revolutionary nature' because from now on it will not be 'the narrow-angled Kemalist view but the wide-angled Atatürkist approach' that will prevail. He adds that 'certain taboos, which had remained untouchable for so many years, have come to be broken.'

Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, who is responsible for EU affairs, has commented that the laws are 'the most comprehensive and deepest reform package in the history of the republic,' a sentiment echoed by some human rights activists.

Present Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and the Foreign Ministry believe that the next step is for Europe to set a firm date to begin accession negotiations. The EU, while welcoming the reforms in general, believes that the new laws have to be carefully analysed and their practical implementation monitored.

The EU will no doubt want additional changes before it sets a date for talks to start. Religious issues and the role of the military will probably be raised. The use of minority languages in education may well become a point of contention. More importantly, no one

still seems to know how Turkey and the Union will handle Cyprus. Even if all the potential areas of disagreement are cleared away, setting a date for negotiations would be premature when the present enlargement process is not yet complete.

## MAGICAL KEY

Parliament's acceptance of change reflects the influence of pro-EU forces, including the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association and the Economic Development Foundation, both of which have used a variety of tactics to create a strong pro-European climate among the public, parliamentarians and the civil and military elites. The European Movement 2002 devised a simple yet effective tool, mounting a digital clock opposite the entrance to parliament, counting the days, hours and minutes until the December EU summit in Copenhagen.

Perhaps because membership is treated as a magical key that will open the doors to all good things, or perhaps because there is an unquestioned association of integration with the high values that have long been cherished in the dreams of the Turkish elite – a working liberal democracy and western style modernisation – very few seem to openly reject it. Even the harshest sceptics only seem able to take the position of 'OK, say yes to the EU – but with some conditions.'

While sceptics' arguments seem to boil down to concerns over sovereignty or vaguely defined 'national security', enthusiasts respond with equally vague but seductive promises of democracy, a better life and world respect. By appealing to the public's long-standing and deeply established psychological inferiority towards the developed world, the issue of membership has become a ritual collective belief, which even a powerful group like the military would not easily dare to resist.

## MILITARY SILENCE

Despite sceptics' frequent use of national security arguments, the military has remained unnaturally quiet through the debate. In fact, it has become clear that the fundamentals of membership, such as modernisation and westernisation, overlap with the military's basic long-standing philosophy. The military position of not saying a clear 'no' to membership is likely taken as a tacit 'yes' by pro-EU activists, isolating the antis even further.

Even though the military won its struggle against the separatist PKK in the southeast, a growing Kurdish ethnic consciousness and claims for political representation are making it increasingly clear that the 'Kurdish problem' has not responded well to the traditional recipe of 'security first, liberalisation later – provided there's no security risk attached.' Now under cover of popular European Union membership, reforms have been made that would otherwise have been next to impossible.

## WHAT NEXT?

The EU cannot ignore Ankara's dramatic move; by concentrating on the implementation of change it will be able to play for time. Recent political crises and ministerial resignations have put at risk the momentum of recent months. Only after the elections on November 3 will it be clear whether there is commitment to implement the reforms the EU requires. At the Copenhagen summit in December the Union will probably remind Turkey of other requirements for accession, the most problematic of which is Cyprus. This has the potential to tip the balance within Turkey towards a sceptical point of view, so the EU must formulate its demands very carefully. In reality the situation is very delicate.

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