

The Turkish Dilemma

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Cyprus aside, relations between the EU and Turkey are going through a difficult phase. Turkey was given the opportunity to start accession negotiations although there were at the time serious reservations on whether it met the relevant criteria. In Turkey there is now a widespread feeling that whatever reforms are undertaken they are never enough for the Europeans. On its part the EU perceives that in reality Ankara does not play by the rules. Not only Turkey is reluctant to move forward toward meeting its obligations but when legislation is passed it does not necessarily mean that it is implemented.

Indeed Turkey has to address the issue of the Kurds, religious minority rights, the role of women, the role of the army and the further democratization of the country. It also has to recognize the Armenian genocide. Cyprus remains the key issue on which inevitably Turkey is being tested. Although it is not the most important problem faced by Turkey, it has evolved into an issue of embedded symbolism and national pride. For both the EU and Turkey it has also become an issue over which both principles and credibility are tested; unavoidably Cyprus is developing into a political litmus test. The EU started accession negotiations with a country occupying a substantial part of the territory of one of its members, with the minimum obligations undertaken. Yet Ankara is not willing to honour them. For Ankara it will be a test of its ability to really change and uphold the norms and the values of the Union that it wishes to join.

Ankara believes that it deserves a fair treatment by the EU and maintains that it cannot understand why the Union ignores its size and its potential for the sake of a country of less than 1 million people. Indeed, this position adopted by Ankara may

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be indicative of the lack of a full understanding of what the EU is all about. Although the EU appreciates the importance of Turkey, it has to make sure that its principles and values are not compromised. This approach is not undertaken for the sake of Cyprus. What is at stake is the waning credibility of the Union itself. And the Union is fully aware that its own credibility has suffered repeatedly in the last years over a range of issues.

On its part the US has been trying to advance the European ambitions of Turkey consistently and irrespective of whether or not the necessary conditions were met. President Bush expounded on the strategic role of Turkey earlier this week. Perhaps it is this American zealotness in relation to Turkey's European ambitions that has contributed to Ankara's a la carte attitude in relation to its obligations.

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