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## U.S.-EUROPE ANALYSIS SERIES

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### **Turkey's European Quest: The EU's Decision on Turkish Accession**

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On October 6, 2004, the European Commission is scheduled to issue two reports on Turkey that will help determine that country's future relationship with the EU. The first is a "Regular Report on Turkey's Progress Toward Accession," an annual assessment of Turkey's efforts to meet the EU's "Copenhagen criteria" for membership—including stability of democratic institutions, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and a functioning market economy. In 2002, EU leaders pledged that if Turkey met those criteria by December 2004 the EU would begin accession negotiations with Ankara "without delay." The second report will assess the potential political, economic, and financial impact Turkish accession would have on the EU, including in sensitive areas such as agriculture. EU leaders will then consider the two reports and decide at their December summit whether, when, and under what conditions to begin the Turkish accession process.

The stakes surrounding the October report and the December decision could scarcely be higher for Turkey and its relations with the West. After decades of pursuing the dream of EU membership, and several years of a far-reaching domestic reform process, Turkish expectations are high. A positive signal from the EU would reward the Turkish government—led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)—for its ambitious reform program. It would also encourage Turkey to effectively implement some of the new measures on freedom of expression, human rights, and civilian control of the military. A rejection by the EU, on the other hand, could have a devastating effect on the Turkish reform process, economy, and relations with Europe. The AKP government would be discredited, the improving economy set back as foreign direct investment and the stock market fell, incentives for improving human rights reduced, and Turkish nationalists and Islamists emboldened. The message to Turks—and in many ways to the entire Muslim world—would be that the EU's word cannot be trusted, and Europeans are simply not prepared to allow a predominantly Muslim country into its ranks.

None of this is to say that Turkey has today fulfilled all of the political and economic criteria for EU membership or that much hard work—especially in terms of implementing some of the new legislation—is not still needed. Nor is it to overlook the real challenges actual Turkish

membership would entail for the EU. Turks must understand that even in the best of circumstances, accession talks—which are really not so much negotiations as the process of Turkey aligning its domestic rules and regulations with those already adopted by the EU—will go on for years. Still, the EU, in its October report and December decision, should acknowledge Turkey’s progress, announce the start of accession talks for the spring of 2005, and begin the long and difficult process of preparing both Turkey and the EU for Turkey’s eventual membership.

### **Turkish Reform and the EU Incentive**

While EU membership for Turkey no doubt remains far off, the country’s progress toward that goal over the past several years has been remarkable. As recently as December 1997, Turkey was not even acknowledged to be an official EU “candidate” and instead was put in a special category behind 12 other aspiring members, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe. In 1999, however, the EU reversed course, accepting Turkey as a candidate and declaring that Turkey would eventually be allowed to join the Union if it met the same criteria as the other candidates. Since then, a much more positive Turkey-EU dynamic has developed, whereby various Turkish governments have used the incentive of EU membership as leverage in pressing for otherwise very difficult domestic reforms.

The February 1999 capture of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan has also helped advance reform. The subsequent improvement in the security situation created a climate in which Turkish governments felt better able to implement the democracy and human rights policies demanded of them by the EU. After 1999, successive governments—starting with the coalition government of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and continuing under Erdogan and the AKP after November 2002—pursued these reforms with growing zeal. While more progress must still be made, the nine reform packages passed by these governments amount to progress toward democracy and human rights in Turkey beyond what most observers would have believed possible only a few years ago. Key areas include the following:

- **Civil-military relations.** The role of the powerful Turkish military in domestic politics has long been one of the greatest obstacles to Turkish entry in the EU. The military has intervened repeatedly in politics (including through military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and the ouster of an Islamist government in 1997) and has exercised strong influence over civilian leaders through the National Security Council (NSC) established following the 1980 coup. Recent reforms have significantly reduced the military’s role—at least on paper—in the name of satisfying EU demands. As of August 2004, a civilian, rather than a general, is now head of the NSC, whose meetings are now by law limited in number and no longer governed by draconian secrecy policies. New laws also now provide for greater transparency in the military budget process. Civilian control has also been enhanced by the removal of military representatives from the boards that oversee broadcasting, higher education, and new limits on the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians.

These reforms will certainly strengthen Turkish democracy and the case for its EU membership. The key test of the military’s willingness to play a lower-profile political

role, however, would come if the AKP government decided to push forward with sensitive legislation in areas such as religious education or the wearing of headscarves, or if the security situation in southeastern Turkey were to deteriorate.

- **Human rights.** The Erdogan government now stresses a “zero tolerance” policy on torture, and provisions on the rights of detainees and prisoners have been improved. Pretrial detention periods have been shortened and detainees are now guaranteed immediate access to an attorney. Recent legislation has also broadened freedom of expression, press, association, assembly and demonstration. The repeal of Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law, which prohibited the dissemination of separatist propaganda, has led to a significant reduction in the numbers of political prisoners being held.

The key to the EU’s reaction to these reforms will be implementation. For instance, while overt torture is declining, other abuses (such as sleep deprivation) appear to go on. There is also some evidence that human rights campaigners are still subject to intimidation and that the state still pursues court cases against people expressing opinions peacefully. In southeastern cities, even where emergency rule has been lifted, newspapers have been closed or fined for criticizing the military. So-called “honor killings” also appear to go on in parts of the country.

- **Cultural rights.** Ankara now acknowledges that Turkey has minorities based on “racial, religious, sectarian, cultural, or linguistic differences” and repealed laws curtailing the rights of such minorities. In a revolutionary measure, recent reform packages introduced the right of broadcasting, publication and instruction in languages other than Turkish, in effect officially liberalizing the use of Kurdish language. As of August 2004, even state-run radio and television has started limited broadcasts in Kurdish, Arabic, and other languages and dialects. Once again, however, implementation will be the critical issue. Kurdish language instruction is still strictly regulated, and classes limited in size and number, as is the time allocated for broadcasting in Kurdish on Turkish television.
- **Judicial reform.** The Turkish Judicial system has been significantly reformed—and Turkish Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Laws have been amended—in line with EU requirements. The death penalty was abolished in August 2002. Reforms also now allow for the retrial of legal cases that have been contradicted by the European Court of Human Rights. This particular alignment with EU law led to the June 9, 2004 release (pending a new trial) of four formerly imprisoned Kurdish members of Parliament, including well-known Kurdish human rights activist Leyla Zana. Most recently, the May 2004 reform package abolished the State Security Courts that had been set up following 1980 military coup to deal with “security offenses against the indivisible integrity of the State.”
- **Economic reform.** Recent liberalization of the Turkish economy appears to be having an effect. After weathering the most severe economic crisis in its modern history in 2000-01 (when the economy shrunk by some 7.5%), Turkey is on a strong path of recovery. Inflation is down from over 70% in 2001 to 12 percent, interest rates are down, and growth is expected to be over 5% for 2004. The stock market is rising, a sign of investor confidence and in anticipation of a positive decision from the European Union.

The IMF and private rating agencies appear to be satisfied with the fiscal discipline of the AKP government.

- **Cyprus policy.** Turkish efforts to find a solution to the division of Cyprus were never made an explicit precondition for EU accession, but the political reality has always been that Turkish opposition to a Cyprus settlement would undermine its chances of joining the EU. Reversing the course of the hard-line Ecevit government that preceded it, the Erdogan government made a Cyprus settlement a high priority, largely in the name of removing the issue as an obstacle to Turkey's accession to the EU. Erdogan invested significant political capital and defied Turkish nationalists in urging Turkish Cypriots to approve a UN plan for political settlement. In the April 2004 referendum on the proposed UN plan, 65% of Turkish Cypriots supported the plan whereas 75% of Greek Cypriots rejected it. The Turkish government's strong support of the plan (in contrast to the Greek Cypriot leadership's opposition) earned it much political credit with the EU and has helped Turkey's case for membership.

### **The Difficult Path Ahead**

Despite these far-reaching reforms, no one should overlook the obstacles that remain. First, the October Commission report will have to conclude that Turkey has substantially met the Copenhagen criteria and recommend that membership talks begin; that outcome is likely but not yet certain, given some of the enduring questions about implementation of Turkish reforms. Next, even if the Commission report is favorable to Turkey, EU leaders would have to agree—unanimously—at their summit in December to launch accession talks. Given the EU's commitments to Turkey, rejection of a positive Commission recommendation is unlikely, but a national veto could not be excluded. France, for example, might worry that a positive signal to Turkey in December would lead public opinion to reject the pending EU Constitution in referenda planned for next year. Finally, even if the Council does agree to start accession talks, that process will be long, and would only be completed if and when all EU members—and the EU parliament—were ready to take the revolutionary step of welcoming Turkey into the EU. The key challenges along this long path include the following:

- **European Public Opinion.** According to recent opinion polls, only around one-third of Europeans are in favor of Turkey's EU membership, whereas nearly half are against it. In key countries like France and Germany, nearly 60% of the population (according to February 2004 polls) opposes Turkish membership. Much of public opinion throughout Europe fears that Turkish entry could lead to an incoming wave of poor, Muslim immigrants, at a time when integration of immigrant communities is already proving extremely difficult. Such fears are easily exploited by far-right movements, which have been growing across Europe.
- **Institutional Issues.** With a growing population of nearly 70 million already, expected to rise to over 90 million over the next 20 years, Turkey could well be the EU's largest member state by the time it actually joined. Because the proposed new Constitution allocates political representation and voting weight in EU institutions according to population, Turkey would immediately upon entry become one of the most powerful

single actors in the Union—with the most votes on the European Council and the most members of the European Parliament, for example. This is not a palatable prospect for either big countries used to dominating like France and Germany or for small ones who already fear being dominated by coalitions of large states.

The effect of Turkish membership on EU institutions should not be exaggerated. Even if Turkey's population growth outpaces other Europeans in the coming decade as projected, even by 2015 it would still only be around 15% of the total. The EU, moreover, is likely to become more flexible over the years, allowing different levels of integration precisely to accommodate members like Turkey that might not want or be able to proceed with some aspects of integration.

- **Economic Challenges.** Despite Turkey's improving economy, membership would pose at least two major challenges—adapting both the EU's system of agricultural support and its program of regional aid, known as structural funds, to Turkey's large agricultural sector and its many poor regions. About 38% of Turks still live in rural areas with low productivity in agriculture. And with an average GDP of less than \$4,000 per capita, Turkey would be eligible for significant structural funding, which provides support for any region with a GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average. Under these circumstances, Turkish accession to the European Union could cost as much as 15 billion euros per year.

But there would also be economic advantages to Europe of Turkish entry. With its dynamic private sector and flexible labor markets, Turkey in the EU—like Ireland and Spain before it—has the potential to take-off economically and provide an attractive market for European goods and capital. Moreover, while Turkish immigration poses problems, the realities of European demographics and generous social welfare states mean that importing foreign labor will be necessary, and a European Turkey could be the best option for providing it. As for the structural funds and the costs of subsidizing Turkish agriculture, by the time Turkey actually joins the EU, both the Common Agricultural Policy and the structural funds system will likely be significantly revised.

- **Geopolitical issues.** Turkey's borders with Iraq, Iran, Syria, Armenia, and Georgia may prove problematic for the European Union on many fronts. Many Europeans worry about taking in a country that is geographically largely outside of Europe and situated in a region plagued with conflict, instability, and terrorism. They also wonder where the EU's borders would eventually end. Yet Turkey's geopolitical situation could be an opportunity as well as a challenge. Turkey's economic weight, military strength, good relations with both Israelis and Palestinians, and potential influence in the Muslim world could be useful to a Europe in search of a more strategic role in this critical region.

## **Moving Forward**

The EU should start accession negotiations with Ankara in the spring of 2005. Given Turkey's essential compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, its progress toward liberal democracy, and positive efforts in Cyprus, the right strategy for the EU now is to reward Turkish reform while

clearly communicating with Ankara about what progress must still be made and how long the process may take.

Prospective EU membership has indisputably been the strongest catalyst of democratic reform in Turkey. Without it much of the recent progress would not have been made. While this could argue for continuing to dangle the prospect of accession talks in front of the Turks without actually delivering it, that process cannot go on indefinitely. An EU failing to deliver on its word now, given what Turkey has done, could undermine supporters of democratic reform within Turkey and strengthen nationalists or Islamists who want to move the country in a different direction. The EU can and should make clear that the accession process will take time—probably at least 10 years—and that Turkey still has work to do, but it also needs to indicate clearly that the process is moving forward.

To make accession realistic in the longer term, responsible EU leaders will have to start making the case for Turkey's inclusion to their own public opinion—as a number of them, including German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, already are. The most convincing point is that a stable, prosperous and democratic Turkey on the inside of the EU will be better for Europe than an unstable and poor one on the outside. Europeans should also emphasize the long-term strategic, cultural, economic and security benefits from the inclusion of a democratic, secular, pro-Western, and moderately Muslim country to the Union.

Turkish leaders—in addition to ensuring full implementation of the recent reforms—also have to engage with both their own and EU public opinion. At home, the risk is unrealistic expectations about a fast track to full membership. While making the case for EU entry, Turkish leaders need to let their public know that Europe's caution on the issue is legitimate and understandable, rather than an affront to Turks or to Islam. Turkey should also launch a public relations campaign designed to convince Europeans about the changes taking place. Stronger interaction with European journalists, students, civil society, and the business community would help demonstrate Turkey's changing nature and overcome many existing prejudices.

Finally, the United States should maintain its strong support for Turkey—and Turkey's EU membership—but quietly. Washington's support for Turkish membership in the late 1990s was useful in getting the EU to hold out the incentive of membership, but in the current transatlantic climate, overt U.S. lobbying would probably be counterproductive. Given the very positive signals coming out of Brussels and EU capitals on the issue of late, moreover, it is probably unnecessary. Contrary to pessimists' expectations over the past several years, Turkey has held up its end of the Turkey-EU bargain. Barring unexpected setbacks, the EU should do the same.