

2009 is a make or break year for the EU and Turkey

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An abrupt and unusual word buried in a European Union declaration on December 8 showed the mounting risks of a breakdown in Turkey's EU membership talks. Ankara's need to solve its problems with Cyprus, foreign ministers warned, has become "urgent." Thanks also to Turkey's failure to meet EU reform benchmarks since negotiations started in 2005, a showdown looks inevitable over the next year.

Failure to reform and deep political polarization have led to a sense of lost direction in Turkey. Nationalism and human-rights violations are again on the rise. As the adoption of EU norms looks more distant, ethnic tensions between Turks and Kurds have risen. The EU anchor of Turkey's economic miracle this decade and with it the great progress made in a golden era of reform from 2000 to 2004 are at risk.

For Europe, the costs of losing Turkey are higher than it thinks. European access to one of the biggest and fastest-growing nearby markets would become more difficult. The souring EU relationship has helped slow the EU's first effort to diversify away from Russian gas supplies with the planned Nabucco natural gas pipeline across Turkey. What's more, an EU that proves unable to work on an equal basis with Turkey will deepen a belief in the Islamic world that the West rejects Muslims.

There are many reasons for this damaging EU-Turkey divergence. EU populations and politicians are cooler to enlargement than ever before. Sound arguments about Turkey's long-term contribution to the EU are losing ground to nostalgia for an idealized vision of a homogenous European past, along with fears about radical Islam and the potential loss of jobs to Turkish immigrants.

In Turkey, disillusionment began with the EU's 2004 admission of Cyprus as a divided state run by Greek Cypriots, when it was the Turkish Cypriots who had accepted, and the Greek Cypriots who had rejected, the EU-backed United Nations peace plan. French and German attacks on Ankara's right to join the EU further demotivated Turkish leaders, who slowed the adoption of EU law to a crawl. Additionally, half of the 33 negotiating chapters are now frozen for political reasons by the Greek Cypriots and the French. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan angrily dressed down EU diplomats at an Ankara dinner in September, telling them the EU had got the "bucket stuck in the bottom of the well."

In such an atmosphere, Turkey-skeptic EU states, or perhaps Turkish politicians angry with Europe, may try to suspend the negotiations altogether. One pretext could be Turkey's promise, made in order to win the opening of negotiations in 2005, to normalize relations and trade with Cyprus. When Turkey had failed to do so by December 2006, the EU said it would study the issue "in particular in 2007, 2008 and 2009." Brussels' new warning that the issue is "urgent" implies that this ambivalent wording is now seen as a deadline.

Paradoxically, this cooling of relations comes just as Turkey is showing how much it can do to complement EU goals. Ankara has played key roles in representing the EU point of view over Iran's nuclear policy and nudging Lebanese factions toward compromise on a new president - actions which Brussels acknowledged in its 2008 Turkey progress report. This year it has mediated talks between Syria and Israel, and opened up dialogue with both the Iraqi Kurds and even an old enemy, Armenia. In recognition of Turkey's responsible foreign policy, the country was elected to a two-year seat on the United Nations Security Council.

EU politicians must do their share to avoid a crisis. They should recognize their past mistakes on Cyprus,

engage evenhandedly in support of the promising new Cypriot talks in progress since September, and publicly commit funds to a future Cyprus settlement.

The dangers of failure were highlighted last month when the Turkish and Greek navies and Greek Cypriot-chartered oil-prospecting ships sparred over territorial rights in the Mediterranean.

Since 1963 the EU has repeatedly promised Turkey full membership once it meets all criteria. Now would be a good time to reaffirm this promise. Also, the EU would win by following the call of pro-Turkey EU states to deepen strategic dialogue with Ankara.

Turkey should do its utmost to give arguments to the pro-Turkish EU presidencies of Sweden and Spain in 2009 and 2010. The government and opposition should overcome their mutual hostility, implement the long-delayed reform program, and relaunch work on a new, more democratic constitution. Unfortunately for Ankara, EU politicians care more about the anti-enlargement mood at home than about Turkey's geostrategic role. Only a full adoption of European norms can prove that Turkey truly wishes to be part of the EU family.

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Sources

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