

Yes, the Turks Are Good Enough for Europe

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Of the 13 candidate countries waiting to enter the European Union, 12 -- including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta -- are expected to be promised membership at today's meeting in Copenhagen.

Only Turkey is likely to be left out. Ankara has been told that its human rights record does not meet European standards and that Turkey needs to improve its democracy. If Turkey does its assigned homework, then the EU might take another look in the future.

Turkey might not have a stellar democracy or a perfect record on human rights, but is it less qualified than, say, Latvia, one of the fortunate 12? As of December 2001, half a million Latvians (one-fifth of the tiny Baltic country's population) still lacked citizenship because they speak Russian. This means they cannot get passports and so cannot travel out of the country, nor can they vote. An official report by the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe cites "asphyxiation using a plastic bag and strangulation by a guitar wire" as being among measures used by the Latvian security forces.

This does not mean that Latvia should be excluded, because joining Europe will help it mature democratically. Experience shows that EU accession has helped countries such as Greece and Portugal move toward democratic consolidation. Yet the EU glass is half full when it comes to some candidates but half empty when it comes to Turkey.

Another argument holds that Turkey is not part of Europe geographically. Yet Cyprus is expected to get membership. An island traditionally considered to be part of the Middle East, Cyprus is 65 miles from Syria but, at the shortest distance, 500 miles from the European continent.

So what is the EU's real problem with Turkey? Turkey is simply too big a bite for the old Continent to digest. Although not poorer than most other candidates, Turkey, with its 72 million mostly low-income inhabitants, does present a challenge. So far, the EU has provided its poorer members development cash from wealthier Northern Europe. But European economies have been in a slow-growth mode for almost a decade. Absorbing 12 mostly poor new members with more than 100 million inhabitants is a large enough test for the EU.

Europe has to be honest about its economic impotency with regard to accepting Turkey. Denials of this reality and the use of unconvincing arguments as a cover-up will be perceived as expressions of old prejudices against Islam. That could send a wrong message to those Muslims who believe in the EU ideals of open and democratic societies and rule of law. This is especially true for European Muslims, the fastest-growing religious community on the Continent.

The EU must be frank toward Turkey and give the Turks a firm date for membership, even if it takes a decade of negotiations. With its shrinking demography and stagnant economy, the European Union would benefit from Turkey's young and Western-oriented population, as well as its dynamic economy: Turkey has averaged an annual growth rate of 4.5% over the last two decades, compared with barely over 1% for the EU as a whole. And tying a predominantly Muslim yet secular and democratic nation to the Continent is in the EU's best interests. Telling the Turks they are not good enough for Europe is not.

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