

EU offer would boost reform in Turkey

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Although recent events in Turkey raise concerns, there are grounds for believing a firm promise of EU membership can help advance reforms, writes John O'Brennan.

After a fraught and difficult year, the European Union is faced with the extremely contentious issue of whether to proceed to substantive membership negotiations with Turkey. In advance of the European Council decision, expected on October 3rd, it is worth examining what is at stake for the EU.

The internal EU debate about Turkey revolves around two distinct issues. The first is identity and culture. There are many within the EU who see Turkey as an Asiatic rather than a European country, or at best a "Eurasian" country, a bridge between Europe and Asia. Turkey's population of 72 million is overwhelmingly Muslim and thus seen as a threat to Europe's increasingly secular value system. Although the EU is manifestly not a religio-cultural entity, this does not prevent those opposed to Turkish membership, including Pope Benedict XVI, alluding to the weight of cultural difference as the key barrier to Turkish accession.

The second key issue is the political power Turkey would potentially wield within the EU. Under the complex weighted voting system used by the EU Council of Ministers, Turkey would command a similar voting strength to Germany, France and the UK. That is something that worries Paris and Berlin especially. Turkish membership, say the critics, would paralyse a decision-making system that is already creaking in the wake of the eastern enlargement and the inefficient institutional architecture recalibrated through the Nice Treaty.

In the run-up to the European Council summit, the Turkish negotiating hand has been significantly weakened. On the one hand the EU enthusiasm for further enlargement has receded significantly in the aftermath of both the 2004 eastern enlargement and the antipathy to expansion demonstrated in the constitutional treaty referendums in France and the Netherlands.

Recent events within Turkey have not helped its cause either. The decision to prosecute the country's greatest living writer, Orhan Pamuk, for allegedly "denigrating the nation" by making public reference to the 1915 mass murder by Ottoman forces of Armenians was

followed last week by another judicial decision to ban a proposed academic conference dealing with the same issue. Although the Turkish government had nothing to do with these decisions, they have enabled EU obstructionists to argue that Turkey's value system is fundamentally incompatible with the liberal norms which lie at the core of the EU's identity.

What then can the EU hope to achieve in proceeding to negotiations? The answers can be found in the mechanisms used by the Union to incorporate future member-states. In short, the offer of membership to outside states and the management of enlargement processes has proved the most effective foreign policy tool the EU has employed in its efforts to stabilise, modernise and democratise a whole range of states on its southern and eastern borders over the past two decades. Just as earlier accession processes helped transform Greece, Portugal and Spain from authoritarian, economically backward states into vibrant and dynamic liberal democracies, so too can the accession process help Turkey's modernisers effect the transition they (and the EU) so desire.

More recently, the EU's experience of eastern enlargement demonstrates how effective are both the membership criteria and the pre-accession process as instruments for reshaping the applicant state's public administration, judiciary, and economy. In effect, the EU transposes its norms on to applicant states in advance of their accession. The process is completely asymmetrical, with the applicant state having no option but to accept the changes recommended by Brussels.

In Central and Eastern Europe the transposition and implementation of EU laws helped consolidate fragile democratic institutions, open up previously moribund economies, strengthen administrative capacity, reduce corruption in public life and stabilise relations between neighbouring countries. The benefits this has brought the EU include a vast increase in intra-European trade and the stabilisation of its external borders.

At a more micro level, my own research into the eastern enlargement demonstrates that for EU policy to work a "good cop/bad cop" strategy works best. This revolves around a firm promise of membership coupled with the credible threat of exclusion (in the case of failure adequately to transpose EU legislation and norms).

Prospective member-states must have sufficient incentive to carry on domestic reform programmes, which bring them closer to EU norms, but they encounter significant local opposition as more and more legislative measures are adopted. The actions of the Turkish judiciary in recent weeks constitute just such an example of domestic contestation of EU standards and have been condemned by the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Those within the EU opposed to Turkish membership should look at the record of reform of the AKP government since it won a landslide victory in the 2002 election. It has pushed through four major reform packages, some of which required significant changes in the Turkish legal code.

Significant though these reforms have been, there is still a fragility about Turkey's engagement with modernisation and Europeanisation. The EU needs to act on the commission's recommendation to open talks. If it does it will accelerate the Turkish reform programme and ensure its eventual success. There is a lot at stake at next week's summit. The EU should not shirk the challenge.