

Europe Stumbles

By rights, the EU should be celebrating. Instead, it's ensnarled in debate over Turkey and its own identity.

BY OWEN MATTHEWS AND CARLA POWER

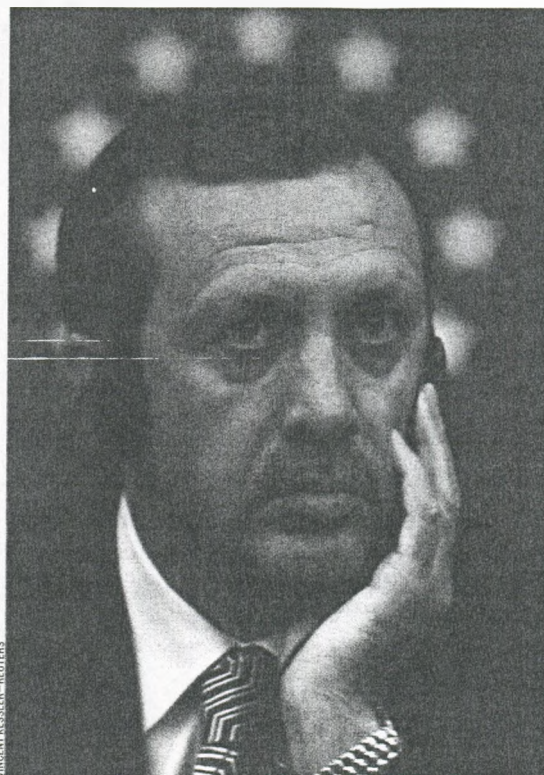
THE SLOW-MOVING WORLD OF Brussels diplomacy isn't known for political cliffhangers. Yet just three weeks before the European Union celebrates its moment of glory, it could stumble.

The reasons are as clear as they are intractable: what to do with the divided island of Cyprus, how to solve a flap with NATO over the EU's new defense force—and, most important, when or whether to admit Turkey as a bona fide member of Europe. The solution? Simple, says Steven Everts of the Centre for European Reform. "Roll them into one, and you'd get a grand bargain."

All this will be on the agenda on Dec. 12, when the EU meets in Copenhagen to put the final stamp on a new, expanded Union, erasing the long fault line of the cold war. Ten new members, all but two from the former Eastern bloc, will be officially accepted, and two others, Romania and Bulgaria, will be given a start date for talks leading to membership in a few years. But what was to be a party is unexpectedly turning ugly. Instead of a festival for Europe's coming of age, the meeting promises a painful debate about what it means to be European. And that question, exposing an ugly chauvinism, could sour the whole affair.

Greece, Turkey and Cyprus are at the heart of the controversy. In a classic piece of Brussels horse trading, Cyprus must be admitted to the EU, lest Athens veto the entire expansion. Since there's little chance that the island will be reunited before Dec. 12, the EU must reluctantly accept the ethnic Greek Republic of Cyprus on its own. Result: the Turkish part will be left in a kind of constitutional limbo, angering Turkish Cypriots' sponsors in Ankara.

Thus the Turks must be placated. That means giving them some kind of signal that they, too, will be admitted to the Union. If not, the new Turkish government will come under massive pressure from voters and from the politically powerful military to annex northern Cyprus—and conceivably put a stop to its drive to join the EU altogether.



'NEW GENTLEMAN': Erdogan has impressed on his tour

Many members of the Union would prefer to ignore this awkward issue and get on with processing its 10 immediate candidates, itself a Herculean task. But Turkey isn't willing to proceed at Brussels' snail-like pace. This month's landslide election victory of Tayyip Erdogan and his AK Party—secular Islamists, to coin an oxymoron—has thrown tremendous momentum behind Turkey's push for membership. Indeed, Erdogan was high-stepping around Europe last week pushing for a date to start talks. If Bulgaria and Romania, why not us, he asked. After all, Turkey is bigger, more modern and more prosperous. He seems to have been a hit. "This new gentleman is pretty impressive," observed one senior Brussels official. Erdogan's message: his party is willing to do whatever it takes to get Turkey into the EU—and that includes a deal on Cyprus,

based on a plan floated by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan earlier this month. Greece has voiced its support for Annan's initiative, as well.

One problem down, two to go? Not quite. Javier Solana, the EU's foreign-policy czar, concedes that "the music coming out of Turkey is good," as one aide puts it. But he has a bigger wish list. He not only wants the Turks to back the Annan plan on Cyprus, but to allow the new EU defense force to be able to use NATO resources. The Turks agreed in principle, but there's still substantial disagreement over specifics. Give Ankara major progress on either EU membership or Cyprus, though, and those pesky military differences are history.

Two problems down? Again, not quite. For Solana & Co. have a third caveat. Turkey's just not ready for membership, they say. Before talking dates, there must also be more progress on human rights and social reforms—actual "implementation," as the Europeans put it. In other words, Europe wants a track record of deeds, validated over years, not just by the good intentions (however welcome) embodied in recent legislation. All these things are achievable, Solana told Erdogan last week. Turkey must just be patient.

There's more than a whiff of sophistry here. No one is suggesting, after all, that Turkey join the Union today. The timeline could easily be a decade—ample time to establish the track record Europe seeks. So what's really going on? Call it a crisis of identity, and not Turkey's. The irony is that, at the moment of its greatest triumph, Europe is convulsed by painful uncertainties of what it is to be European. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing earlier this month declared that admitting Muslim Turkey would be the "death of Europe." And that's indeed the choice: the Christian club and cozy "Europe" of the old European Community, to which even Britain was twice denied entry, or the wider, multicultural Europe preparing to embrace 10 diverse new members. Europe will have to decide, sooner or later. Why not now, and close a grand deal worthy of a great moment? ■

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