Does the EU still have leverage on questions of freedom of expression in Turkey?

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The widely reported clamp-down on civil liberties in Turkey is largely due to decisions taken by the Turkish leadership itself. This reflects problems related to the role of the military, especially in the “Ergenekon” affair and the pressure from the Fethullah Gülen movement. But other problems involve the abandonment of the “democratic opening” to the Kurds in light of renewed terrorism, fears of spillover from the situation in Northern Iraq and Syria, as well as sensitivities on the Armenia question following the failure of earlier efforts at rapprochement, and Ankara’s drift towards a more authoritarian style of leadership.

If setbacks in the exercise of the freedom of expression are largely home-grown, and not a response to disappointed EU ambitions, can the EU (and the US) nonetheless exercise leverage to improve the situation? The continuing importance to Turkey of its US and EU connections should not be underestimated. These links are particularly valuable given the tenuous nature of Turkey’s relations with Syria and other countries in its region following the Arab uprisings. Ankara cannot rely on a strategic alliance with Moscow or with Baku because of its energy dependence. Furthermore, Russia has drawn closer to Israel and Cyprus since the discovery of gas in the eastern Mediterranean.

The current honeymoon between Ankara and Washington is more with the US President than with the Congress or public opinion at large. Popular American sympathies often lie more with Israel, Armenia, Greece and the Kurds, than with Turkey. The honeymoon may well fade away, unless Turkey spruces up its performance on human rights.

The EU’s leverage on human rights issues may have diminished since the de facto suspension of accession negotiations, but it is not negligible. Turkey’s leaders have tried to keep the accession process alive through acceptance of the “positive agenda” put forward by the European Commission. Despite setbacks and increasing scepticism, Turkish leaders still refer with pride to the

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For the best part of the last decade, the Commission has concluded that Turkey sufficiently fulfills the ("Copenhagen") political criteria for EU membership. It will be increasingly difficult for the EU to maintain this or equivalent language unless there are distinct improvements in the freedom of expression in Turkey. To be sure, the EU institutions and member states need to speak the same language if their concern is to resonate with Ankara. Freedom of expression will be high on the agenda when the EU reviews its relations with Turkey on the basis of a new Commission report in December.

Turkey’s diplomats and lobbyists care enough to spend time and energy heading off unfavorable European parliament resolutions. Considerable attention is paid in Turkey to the European Commission’s annual reports. The EU is still in a position to exercise pressure for an improvement in the freedom of expression through its judgment on Turkey’s performance.