



Turkey vs. Europe: Membership or partnership?

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Brussels, June 2009

* Debate at the Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU

In 1999 the European Council said that Turkey had a “vocation” to join the Union. In 2002 in Copenhagen it went a step further giving it candidate status. Negotiations have since started: they are open ended with a monitoring mechanism with annual progress implementation reports, without guaranteed outcome. It was a conditional “yes”. The negotiations would be suspended for non respect of political criteria such as torture, normalization in the Kurdish area, religious and ethnical tolerance, breaches in the rule of law, or gender discrimination. Turkey made clear it wanted to be free to stop the process.

The Commission felt that Turkey accession could have a positive economic impact on the Single Market (although it already is largely part of it, including EU standards). The College was well aware that accession would increase regional economic disparities challenging the implementation of EU cohesion policy with massive demands for EU support; and was prepared to envisage a long transition period in order to give to Turkish farm the opportunity to catch up with their more competitive colleagues in the EU.

It was clear to all that Turkey differed from ant other substantial applicant under many a respect: culture and traditions, population, size, geographical location, economy, security and military potential. Some questioned weather the EU had the absorptive capacity to include such a new member, feared it would affect the future functioning of the Union as well as its identity.

In Commission, it was surmised that the impact assessment downplayed concerns regarding the Union’s capacity to absorb Turkey. The following questions were raised:

1. Will a Union extended to Turkey prove to be effective and dynamic, or unwieldy and dysfunctional? At which point does the EU risk to become over-extended in terms of geography, diversity, financial capacity or security, and hence unable to preserve its cohesion and become an effective world payer (beyond trade)?
2. Can new such an enlargement take place without further deepening of the Union (Constitution, QMV, fiscal policy coordination), or would it hamper EU collective sovereignty?
3. Can the Union achieve its *finalité politique* if it continues to widen and includes a member as large and as distinct as Turkey? And can on be sure that Turkey, when it realizes the constraints of membership, would eventually prove ready to accept it?

Several questions were also raised regarding political criteria such as:

1. Is Turkey a stable secularized democracy? If the latter could only be preserved via three military “coups” (1960, 1971 and 1980) and the 18-point National Security Memorandum of 1997, could there be further backlashes, particularly with a reduced role of the military?
2. Could a declared Muslim Government party eradicate various forms of internal discrimination between ethnic and religious groups with a long history, and do away with separatist movements based on ideology, racism and religion (including substantial differences within Islam itself)?
3. Has the EU been dealing with the Turkish application in a fair, transparent and democratic way? Notably, has the critical determination of its “candidate status” been properly debated in the EP and other public fora? Or has it rather been a backroom demarche by European leaders and diplomats to honour promises made without serious assessment? Can one continue to conceal the issue behind a smokescreen of assurances that enlargement will eventually take place, and that it will have no measurable impact on the character of the Union, its internal cohesion and effectiveness, its current policies and/or its financial capacity?
4. Can the EU credibly continue to stress its drive to enhance transparency, institutional democracy and citizens’ involvement, if it ignores all that when dealing with the most important questions for its future? In this context can it simply consider polls indicating that in most countries only a minority supports Turkish accession, which incidentally is the case also in Turkey itself?
5. Can the Turkish accession process reach its goal if it continues to be driven by the elites on both sides, without involving public opinion? Could it lead both sides to *switch off*, or cause a crisis of legitimacy or protests in both camps fearing a loss of identity, respectively?
6. Can a country join the EU as long as half its women suffer physical or psychological violence at home, “honour killings” are tolerated in case of “extreme provocation (which includes out-of-wedlock sex), prison practices are in contradiction with the penal code, military occupation of Northern Cyprus with Turkish settlements endures, and Greek property owners cannot get their properties or are not compensated for their expropriation?

Commissioner for Enlargement obtained from Commission President Prodi to avoid an orientation debate in Commission before the preparation of the necessary impact study. This is against internal Commission rules. The impact study was totally biased in favour of negotiations, just as Verheugen’s mentor Chancellor Schroeder wished. There were only pros. It was a laugh. It was a purely in-house work with no analysis of geo-strategic and institutional aspects.

Commissioner Fischler, who argued against negotiations across the board, i.a. complained that he had not been given the time to make a proper assessment as to whether Turkey would have been digestible for the **CAP**, unlike was done for all previous accessions; it was clear that the cost impact would be larger than for all new member states. The problems in this sector would be compounded by three facts: Turkey’s agricultural sector is largely outside the market economy, Turkey would have to dismantle state monopolies and it would have to drop its import protection, causing a serious worsening of Turkey’s agricultural trade balance with the EU.

Another vital aspect of such an accession regards **security**. The Commission simply ignored it. Many of the strongest supporters of Turkish accession are those who see it primarily in NATO terms, in particular in the US and the UK. Both want to preserve the Western Alliance and, as far as possible, dual membership of European countries of NATO as well as the EU. Whether overextension of the EU weakens the Union's political project is not their primary concern, and may even be on their wish list.

Two ancillary concerns are the fight against terrorism and fundamentalism, and the westernization of the Muslim world, where the role assigned to Turkey by the West is to act as a "positive" example.

No doubt Turkey is a keystone of Western security and has been so for years, without EU membership. EU accession would not change this. Could it be also a bulwark against fundamentalism? It is possible. That there could nevertheless be a fundamentalist backlash in Turkey despite accession does not cross the mind of accession advocates. They forget that Turkey already was a secular democracy as far back as 1923 under Ataturk, incidentally without any secularizing or democratizing effect on its Arab neighbours, and that it experienced a coup in 1980 that reversed all that for quite some time. Admittedly, EU accession could strengthen the peer pressure against a new relapse into autocracy and fundamentalism. However, the yearning for distinctiveness within the Union (and on a different plan, think of Northern Ireland) shows there is no guarantee against that. Hence, EU membership could strengthen the secularity of Turkish society, but it would not guarantee it, it could even reverse it. In such a case, should we not ask ourselves what the Union's situation would be if such a fundamentalist backlash occurred within Turkey as a full member of the EU? Would EU members be torn apart by discussions as to how to react? Would their own Muslim communities remain passive or move towards fundamentalism as well? Wouldn't most Turks turn against the EU?

If Turkey became a member, the EU would have a foot in the Middle-East and Asia Minor. This is no small potatoes. While Europe's border at the Bosphorous, which includes Istanbul) is easy to defend, the same does not hold for the eastern border of Turkey if it became the EU border. The EU would enlarge its frontiers to Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia and practically Azerbaijan. It is indefensible militarily, quite besides the impossibility of checking on immigrants and imports of animals and all sorts.

Any geo-strategic thinking has to factor in also the Kurdish nation (fragmented by existing political borders). Since the first Gulf War, Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed a large degree of autonomy under US and UK protection, and are reluctant to relinquish it, the more so that they have plenty of oil resources that central Iraq lacks. In case that Kurdish autonomy in Iraq is preserved as I think and eventually leads to independence, it could set off a snow ball towards the unification of the Kurds in the neighbouring countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) into a single State. One can well imagine the consequences for a European Union which would by then include Turkey and hence a part of a new "Kurdistan", as it would have, on the one hand to side with its Turkish member, and on the other decide objectively whether to exclude the Turkish Kurds from the Union or include the whole Kurdistan, including the Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian ones into it, thereby extending its middle-eastern wing further. Turkey's accession would mean "importing" at it were, the Kurdish nation problem.

One can conclude that, while it is possible that Verheugen was right when he said that Turkey's accession would help the EU exporting security to the Middle-East, it is more likely that it would mean for the EU importing middle-eastern security into Europe.

If Turkey – which (except Istanbul) is basically an Asian-Minor and Middle-Eastern country (since the Ottoman Empire pulled out of Europe) – were to join, the Union could expect the other non-EU members of the Council of Europe such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and indeed Russia (since it lost its Asian republics in the South) to lay and back-up their own claims to EU membership. After all, their credentials are generally more European than most of Turkey in terms of geography, history and culture. Like Turkey, Europe's eastern neighbours are riding the horse of Europe's eastern security buffer, notably in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus. Georgian President Saakachvili said: "If Turkey accedes to the EU, I am persuaded that Georgia will follow". Several of these countries see NATO as a sort of admission ticket to the EU, as do the Americans.

All this is encouraged by our ambiguity as to the limits of the Union. Turkey's accession would only lengthen the line of the frustrated countries one may call the Ring of EU Friends to knock at the EU door for acceptance, and makes a refusal less justifiable. If Turkey accedes, the EU Neighbourhood Policy would have to be extended to all of Turkey's own neighbours such as Iran, Iraq and Syria, who incidentally are not on best terms with our US partner.

Finally, a word on cultural and social integration.

One of the most serious problems of Turkish accession lies in **social integration**. Turkey's social policy is quite different from Europe's. Only a minority is covered by collective agreements and less than 5% of the workers is unionized. There is no social dialogue.

While Europe does not need a harmonized social policy, it needs compatible social orders in the Member States. Where this is not the case (e.g. the US in the 1860s, Europe in the mid-19th century) integration collapses or suffers. An accession by Turkey would weaken Europe's social integration and the trend towards a common identity, which are essential building-blocks to ensure that the Union is not undermined.

A rapprochement would be hindered i.a. by Turkey's geographical location, which is peripheral to and actually largely (97%) outside Europe. This is a seriously limiting factor for social contacts between Turkey and Europe. This can, be facilitated by free access of Turkish workers to the Single Market, but the record is not the best and there are limits if xenophobic incidents are to be kept in check.

One particular problem of social integration is gender equality. It is of course also a human rights problem. According to UNICEF, despite the opening of 1000 new schools in 2003, more than 50% of girls aged 7-13 still do not attend schools in eastern and southern Turkey, mostly due to family male opposition. The female employment rate is currently less than half that of the EU (25.5% as against 54.7%). There are other forms of gender inequality in Turkey, such as forced marriages, "honour killings" of women, discriminatory penal code articles (e.g. on rape), prohibition of civil servants to wear trousers in the work place etc.

Moreover, there is a lack of legal certainty due to parallel use of customary law, and a difference between the text and the practice of law. It has been reported that political reform

face resistance from section of the civil service, the judiciary and the security forces, particularly when changes seek to expand religious freedom and minority rights.

The tensions in Turkey's multifaceted society remain, divided as it is between ultra religious conservatism and westernized secularism, majority Sunni Muslims and Alevis, men and women, rich and destitute. No European society is such a complex mosaic. Inevitably there remain doubts about Turkey's long-term secular and democratic credentials.

A matter of paramount importance for the integration of countries and people is **culture**. It is mainly culture (not religion) which counts to define what is to be European. A sense of community is easier to establish among states with a common culture than with states that do not share the same culture. This does not at all mean that immigrants should be left out.

Cultural differences are inevitable and can indeed be a positive factor for a Community. But it is all a matter of degree. For instance, differences in culture, rooted in history and geography, explain the substantial discrepancies and controversies between Germany and France, which need to be tackled by a particularly close partnership. But these are manageable as they remain within the confines of a European culture. Turkey is different as PM Erdogan was aware, when he said that he wanted Turkey to be judged by its political values and reforms, not by its (religion or) culture.

Turkey is a sui generis society, far more oriental than European (except Istanbul). It has often been described as a bridge between Europe and Asia due to its historic ambivalence and shifting location between Europe (where the Ottoman Empire had a large bridgehead) and Asia. Western advocates of Turkish accession consider it instrumental to build a bridge between Christian Europe and Muslim Middle-East and Asia, and to combine moderate Islam with democracy. The Turkish Government answer is that it does

not want to be a bridge, but simply be European. The Arab stance has always been critical of Ottoman colonialism and contrary to Atatürk's efforts to Europeanize and democratize the country. Incidentally, should Europe's role be to follow the Bush approach and try to shape the Muslim world, and should its enlargement be used for that purpose?

The Turkish elite is clearly looking to Europe, but the rest of the population has in the back of its mind Turkey's "rêve d'orient" shaped by the Ottomans. The mass of Turkey's society is unaware of, or uninvolved in the government's European policy and culturally estranged from it. Turkey would no doubt contribute to Europe's cultural diversification, but its effort to achieve its integration in Europe and make it a success could well cause serious tensions within the EU and feed a mental barrier against Europeanization within Turkey itself.

In Commission, criticism was kept within limits because it knew that the Council expected a green light for its own political reasons. Support for accession is mixed, to say the least, both within the EU as well as in Turkey, the lowest of any previous accession at the same stage. Like with past enlargements, the process has been driven by the elites in both camps. On the EU side, it was not just because of enlargement fatigue, one motivation of recent rejections of the Lisbon Treaty, but also because of uneasiness as regards the Europe's identity, political finality, absorptive capacity and geographical limits. For this very reason there will be at least two or three national referenda in the event of an agreement on accession. I expect one or more, if not all of them to reject it. If so, all we will have done is to lose time, with the EU hiding behind voting results to reject accession, Turkey's Government feeling rebuffed, an

important part of its citizens feeling relieved. For both sides it would have been preferable to clarify the character of the association agreement and envisage a special partnership from the outset, allowing for a strong integration of Turkey into the EU without full institutional membership.