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Dancing to the End



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The day of reckoning in EU-Turkey relations is fast approaching. At the December European Council, the Union is expected to decide whether or not accession negotiations with Turkey can start. The Council will base its decision on the regular Progress Report to be issued by the outgoing Commission some time at the beginning of October. The Commission is also expected to publish a feasibility study on the impact of Turkish accession on EU finances, administrative structures and distribution of political, institutional power and seats in EU bodies.

In a thoughtful paper that was recently published Heather Grabbe from the Centre for European Reform, a London based think-tank, opined that “The EU acquired Turkey as a membership candidate in a fit of absentmindedness, not as part of a coherent strategy.... The EU needs to think strategically about this relationship rather than continue to drift. Turkey’s membership aspirations are widely seen as a threat to European integration, but they are really an astonishing opportunity for the EU”. It is quite clear, however, from the ongoing public debate in many European capitals that this is not a widely shared view. In a way, the EU as an entity and its members are finally faced with a momentous challenge that is rendered even more critical in the current turmoil affecting the international system, the perilous state of Trans-Atlantic relations, as well as the upheaval in many countries with a Muslim majority.

While the EU and its members are finally facing the challenge of what to do with Turkey, the Turkish public had already made up its collective mind. In a way, the quandary in which EU members find themselves in is precisely the result of the unexpected surge of reformist zeal in Turkey. By undertaking critical and difficult reforms to fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria, the governments of Turkey in the past three years made great strides to meet the country’s own treaty obligations to become a member of the EU. Based on its own successive decisions from Helsinki in 1999 to Copenhagen in 2002 and thereafter, the EU has the “legal” duty to open accession negotiations with Turkey, as Romano Prodi declared unequivocally in a January lecture delivered in Istanbul. Given these parameters, the current debate in the EU that questions the eligibility of Turkey for membership is one that “is of no use for political decision-makers unless they see themselves induced and are prepared to contemplate a total turn-about in the EU’s declared policy towards Turkey” as Heinz Kramer puts it.

By the same token, a “privileged partnership” suggested by German Christian Democrats and others would be unacceptable for Ankara and the larger public in Turkey, even among the most committed Europhiles. Undoubtedly, if the Commission submits a positive report and recommendation, a decision not to open accession negotiations in December will trigger a domestic political backlash in Turkey. There will also be a stiffening of relations with the EU that will be arguably more severe than the one that followed the 1997 Luxembourg summit denial of candidacy status to Turkey. In fact, given the reasonable expectation that such a decision could lead to a rupture in relations, it would also have significant and mostly adverse repercussions for the identity of the EU, its political future and global credibility as well. As a Wilton Park report summarized: “not to commence negotiations risks losing political momentum in Turkey’s reform process and is not without consequences for the EU. The EU would lose credibility as a decisive international actor ready to make good its promises and the EU’s ability to influence the reform process would be diminished”. It might even be impaired.

In fact there is increasing recognition within some circles in EU countries that in the post-September 11, post-Iraq war international environment Turkey is indeed a pivotal country. Its stability and its Western orientation are expedient for the EU since the anticipated threats to the security of the Union originate from the Greater Middle East and the Muslim world at large. By setting an example of a modern, secular democratic state and society that is compatible with the Muslim tradition, Turkey could help ease the tensions between the two sides of the so-called civilizational divide. Turkey’s membership in the EU, in its turn, would be living proof of the multicultural inclusiveness of the Union. On this view – one that eschews the thorny issues of geography, history, identity and culture *cum* religion – the importance of the relations between Turkey and the EU is best appreciated in the context of the new security environment, strategies for a world order in upheaval and the formation and implementation of a coherent, global EU foreign policy.

This security based argument, by turning the tables on the refrain that it would be undesirable for the EU to border Iran, Iraq and Syria as well as a turbulent southern Caucasus, sees Turkey's accession as an asset for the EU. Indeed, harmonization of EU and Turkish foreign policy is seen as a *sine qua non* of the realisation of the Union's claim that it is a global actor. Turkey's transformation along liberal democratic lines is expected, required and almost inevitable for its own future and stability. Turkey's geopolitical location and military capabilities means that it is destined to enhance the EU's standing as a global actor when it becomes a member. In addition, such a joining of forces would bring some balance to the troubled relations between the two coasts of the Atlantic and help redefine common interests and goals of 'West' that is currently adrift. As Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci argue in a recent report prepared for the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), a Brussels based think-tank: "democratising Turkey would be the bridgehead of a modern, multi-cultural Europe right up to and alongside the ideological chaos and violence of the neighbourhood beyond. Its civilian, military and human resources could be integrated with those of the EU and serve as a spearhead of the EU's soft and not-so-soft power projection into the region".

Since the EU has admitted the island of Cyprus to the east of its capital Ankara, and to the south of Tunisia, the geographical argument against Turkish membership does not quite cut muster. A rejection of Turkish membership on the basis of identity or culture (widely accepted to mean religion) is also problematic. Undoubtedly, Turkey or its predecessor the Ottoman Empire, have been the historical other, first for a Christian and then a secular Europe. Nonetheless, the Empire was part of the Concert of Europe and a force to be reckoned with in European diplomacy and politics. More importantly, Turkey has made a historically daring and unprecedented decision to be part of modern European civilization, and has transformed itself as a state and society accordingly. This was recognized when she became a founding member of the Council of Europe and entered the Atlantic Alliance.

As for the issue of culture, it is quite obvious that with a growing Muslim population of 12-14 million, the identity problem for an ageing EU is already here. The matter of integrating this population has become a burning issue and needs to be addressed realistically, and without prejudice. The inclusion of a predominantly Muslim but secular, democratic and modern Turkey in the European Union would bear witness to the inescapable multiculturalism of the emerging Europe, which is shaped by the ideals of the Enlightenment, liberalism and democracy – ideals that Turkey has committed itself to uphold. Finally, the argument that admitting Turkey would mean opening the Union to Morocco or the Ukraine or even Russia is rather irrelevant given the fact that none of these countries have a binding body of agreements with Brussels or decisions that confirm eligibility for membership. In fact, the question of Turkey's eligibility was decided in 1963 with the treaty of Ankara. In its 1989 opinion rejecting the Turkish application the Commission reaffirmed that eligibility, as did the 1999 Helsinki and subsequent presidency conclusions.

Yet, even Germany's Red-Green coalition, recently converted to the cause of opening accession negotiations, does *not* believe that Turkey is a genuine European country. Therefore, it would be foolish to deny how tough the task is and how much distance needs to be covered. The size of the country in this context emerges as the most pertinent concern: if it ever joins the Union, Turkey will be the country with the largest population with all that size implies for intra-EU balances. There is also the added complication of the deep discontent among the public in the EU-15 concerning the recent enlargement and the precariousness of the fate of the European Constitution. Indeed, some opponents of Turkish membership would take the Constitution hostage if the Union went forward with negotiations. On the other hand, the number of those who believe that only a traumatic shock such as Turkey's accession would shake up ossified EU structures is fast increasing. Those who subscribe to this view believe that the Turkish challenge would pave the way for much needed organizational, budgetary and administrative reforms.

Within this framework the democratic, secular credentials of Turkey and the degree to which its democratic experiment is genuine and deeply rooted, acquire greater significance. Just as important is the sincerity of its desire to become a *bona fide*

member of the EU. If Turkey's transformation along democratic lines is completed, then it should be able to join the EU, which, if it is anything, is a democratic and multicultural club. This definition of the EU is the only one that can make it a global actor and help it to widen its zone of peace and stability. The contention here is that, despite the distance to be covered, Turkey's democratic transformation is genuine. Moreover, it is a function of more than just the carrot of EU membership.

Nathalie Tocci, an astute observer of the Turkish political scene, makes the following observation about the Byzantine nature of EU-Turkey relations: "In several instances in the recent history of EU-Turkey relations, 'anti-Turks' in Europe and 'anti-Europeans' in Turkey reinforced each other in a vicious circle of antagonism and lack of reform in Turkey, together with European distancing from Turkey". It is important then to identify and analyze the turning points that resulted in the weakening, if not yet the total defeat, of the 'anti-Europeans'.

As a result both of Turkey's domestic dynamics – and greatly aided by the lure of future EU membership and of serious EU pressure – over the past three years pro-Europeans have overcome the resistance of anti-Europeans. In a series of power-shifting domestic developments, which included the landslide electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), Turkey radically altered the social basis of its political power structure. This has also led to an alteration in the balance of forces between elected officials, on the one hand, and the military and civilian bureaucracy, on the other. Although there remains a lot to be done for the transformation to be fully absorbed, a critical threshold has already been passed. The succession of reform packages that aimed to harmonise Turkish and EU legislation, the diplomatic opening in Cyprus, and the position adopted during the Iraq war all attest to a strong Turkish commitment to core EU positions and principles.

Formerly an elite project, between 70 and 75 percent of the public now supports EU membership. Although the relations between Turkey and the EEC-EC-EU were always part of the domestic political debate to some extent, the transforming effect of the EU was only mildly felt until the mid-1980s. The intensification of that effect only occurred in late 1990s when a convergence of domestic and international developments prepared the groundwork for solid popular support for EU membership.

The end of the Cold war was both a welcome and unpleasant surprise for the Turkish establishment. The *annus mirabilis* of 1989 was also the year that the Commission turned down Turkey's application for membership despite a reaffirmation of the country's eligibility. Long accustomed to strategic rent collection, the elite were rightly concerned about the country's diminishing strategic importance following the removal of the Soviet threat and the unlikelihood that Europe would be a theater of major wars again. This international loss of status also explains rising pressures to liberalize Turkey's political system. The European Union itself, busy with a succession of challenges such as the reunification of Germany, the single market, enlargement, turned its back on Turkey. In fact, this distancing continued well into the late 1990s despite the succession of crises, from the Gulf War to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the break-up of the Soviet Union, which resurrected the country's strategic importance. Ironically, during that period diplomatic moves in Ankara were coupled by the successful participation of Turkish troops in peacekeeping missions, which contributed to European security. Ankara also acted as an intermediary to bring the newly independent Turkic states of Central Asia into the Eurasian political scene.

Domestically, Turkey did not make much of an effort to reform its political order in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria. Engulfed in a bloody low-intensity conflict against the violent Kurdish separatist organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and unwilling to acknowledge the existence of a Kurdish problem separate from PKK terrorism, the Turkish establishment was disinclined to adopt a reformist path. It feared that liberalizing the polity might lead to a fragmentation of the country, particularly as the separatists appeared to have the upper hand in the early 1990s. Ankara was also suspicious of its allies' motives and believed that their policies gave heart to the separatists. As the war intensified, Turkish democracy regressed and many of the liberal openings of the Özal era were reversed. The security concerns of the period gave the military more of a say in politics, especially after the untimely death of President

The Turkish Transformation



Özal. This process was assisted by the incompetent administration of successive weak and corrupt coalition governments, which perpetuated an increasingly defunct system of patronage. In fact, the mismanagement of the 1990s totally discredited Turkey's political class. It also alienated the electorate from the mainstream parties and pushed them towards the Islamists and ultra-nationalists.

However, in the midst of rising securitization and the consequent militarization of politics, societal forces began to pave the way to a liberal breakthrough. Even the hitherto status quo-oriented and state-dependent Turkish business elite, through its foremost organization, the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD), joined forces, calling for a democratic opening. It adopted a critical lead in demanding far-reaching political reforms to qualify for EU membership. This effort came in the wake of the customs union with the EU, which had been lobbied for by a long protectionist business elite and rising provincial business classes that owed their new status to integration with world markets. It was also at this time that the country underwent a "post-modern coup", the so-called "February 28 process" in 1997. On that occasion, using the mainstream media, the military exerted pressure on the Parliament. By mobilizing public opinion and eventually threatening a real coup, it ousted the Islamist Welfare Party-led coalition government from power in June of that year.

1997, which ended with the fateful EU Luxembourg summit that denied Turkey candidate status, and 1998 were arguably the darkest years both for Turkish democracy and EU-Turkey relations. Turkey abandoned all political dialogue with the EU and relations reached a nadir. The following year saw remarkable developments, which later culminated in the democratic opening of the past three years. The apprehension of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, effectively ended the war with a victory for the Turkish armed forces. Following an exchange of letters between Chancellor Schroeder and the then Prime Minister Ecevit, Turkey reiterated its commitment to its EU goals. A devastating earthquake hit Turkey in August that year. The spectacularly incompetent response of the Turkish state to the calamity and the fact that rescue teams from around the world came to help the victims generated quite a trauma. The imperative of reforming the state and changing the parameters of its relation with the citizenry was deeply felt and widely shared. The process of EU membership thus emerged as the panacea. The Helsinki summit at the end of the year gave Turkey candidate status and pro-EU forces became vocal and active once more.

The death knell for the established order came with the severe crisis of February 2001 that brought the economy to a halt. That year Turkish GNP shrank by almost 10 percent and a painful recovery programme was put in place under the guidance of the IMF. In 2002, pro-EU forces gained more ground, as EU membership was set as an unequivocal strategic goal in inter-elite negotiations. In an underreported meeting in May 2002, the military-dominated National Security Council decided to encourage the pursuit of the reform agenda in the pursuit of that goal. When the thoroughly discredited coalition government decided to take the country to the polls, it did so after enacting the first wave of serious reforms, including the elimination of the death penalty. The electorate, then overwhelmingly pro-EU, took matters into its own hand, sent the established political class home and brought the JDP, which ran on a platform of unabashed and unconditional pursuit of EU membership, to power.

Mistrusted by the military and the established secular elites, the JDP, which represents a new realignment in Turkish politics and has brought new social forces to the fore, had a vested interest in liberalizing the polity and furthering the democratization of Turkey. Its own consolidation of power and protection from inimical forces dictated the strengthening of the rule of law and the liberalization of the political order. Following the road map provided by the National Programme, it enacted a series of groundbreaking reform packages. Overwhelming popular support for EU membership neutralised all objections from military and civilian hardliners and anti-European forces. The government enjoyed unprecedented support and very vocal encouragement from the public in its pursuit of the reform process. It should also be mentioned that within the military establishment itself there was a recognizable division between pro-EU and anti-EU forces, and the fact that the pro-EU General, Hilmi Özkök, was Chief of the General Staff advanced the cause of reform substantially.

As we approach the fateful December EU summit, Turkey has enacted almost all the necessary legislation to qualify for accession negotiations. Problems with implementation persist, and anti-EU forces still hold powerful positions within the security establishment and the judiciary. However, there is also no doubt that the course is set and that the country has come a long way. It is now incumbent upon the JDP government to persevere and make its case to EU governments and European publics. It also behooves the government to let the Turkish public know that the start of negotiations is not the end but the beginning of an arduous process. The country appears ready and committed – albeit somewhat starry eyed. In a few months time it will become apparent whether the European Union proves to be as committed to its promises and to the mutually beneficial modernization and democratization. What is certain, at any rate, is that under existing conditions rational decision-making dictates the continuation of the process between the parties.

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