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The Turkish Accession to the European Union: Mutually beneficial? Mutually possible?

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1. Introduction

Turkey and the EU have had a more than 40-year-old contractual relationship, which was provided with a clear road map on December 2004 with the decision to open up accession negotiations. It is now over one year that Turkey and the EU have been sitting at the negotiation table. However, while the talks are progressing at a technical level, the political relations between the two partners have soured over a number of critical issues including first and foremost the question of Cyprus.

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Currently, the highly-politicized Cyprus issue is a stalemate and there is little hope for reaching an agreement prior to the Turkish parliamentary elections to take place in November 2007. Diverging from the status quo, the Turkish government in power since 2002 has followed a proactive and positive role in supporting the acceptance of a long-lasting settlement on the island within the framework of the latest UN plan, the so-called 'Annan plan'. Turkish Cypriots too showed their approval of settlement by voting 65% "yes" in the referendum of 24 April 2004. However, the plan was voted down by the Greek Cypriots, who were at the time assured of EU membership with or without a settlement. To provide some compensation, the EU made two promises to the Turkish Cypriots, which it then fell short of keeping: i) to provide financial assistance worth 256 million USD and ii) to establish some direct trade links with the Turkish Cypriot part of the island.

Given its constructive Cyprus policy over the last years, the Turkish government now feels that it has shown its good-will and it is time for both the Greek Cypriots and the EU to reciprocate. Without meaningful reciprocation, Prime Minister Erdoğan states, a further move from the Turkish part in no way can be justified in the eyes of the Turkish citizens¹, who feel injustice has been done to the Turkish Cypriots. For the other side, the EU, the opening of Turkish ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels and planes is Turkey's contractual obligation to fulfill the extension of the Turkey-EU Customs Union to the 10 New Member States. Without its fulfillment, the negotiations, at least in certain chapters, can not proceed. It is now expected that the issue will be tackled in the next European Council in December 2006.

Analysts are currently concentrating on the possibility of four scenarios²: i) The optimistic case where a compromise is found on the Cyprus issue on the basis of concessions made to Northern Cyprus to give enough room to the Turkish government to open up ports and airports, ii) The negotiations chapters, which directly relate to the Customs Union, are suspended, iii) Negotiations are slowed down, and the EU gives a 'rendez-vous' to reevaluate the status of negotiations, iv) The EU heads of states opt for a total suspension of the negotiations.

¹ H.E.R. Tayyip Erdoğan: *Speech delivered at 2nd AKP Grand Party Congress*, 11 November 2006 [<http://www.akparti.org.tr/>].

² For a detailed discussion of the possible scenarios, see K. Hughes: *Turkey and the EU: Four Scenarios: From Train Crash to Full Steam Ahead*, A Friends of Europe Report in association with Chatham House and the European Institute of the London School of Economics, September 2006.

Although the last scenario is highly unlikely since the stakes are too high to risk, it is still interesting to observe how the issue of Cyprus can threaten the future of a long-lasting partnership with long-term mutual benefits. The principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, that prior commitments must be kept, is a highly cherished value both in Turkey and in Europe. Therefore, both partners need to adhere to their promises and rebuild the mutual trust that is necessary to keep up the momentum of integration. However, in the current context, trust can only be fostered if both sides manage to shift their focus towards mutually beneficial aspects of this partnership and see the larger picture.

In the next part of the paper, I will try to highlight the areas of mutual interest and point out what contribution the Turkish accession could bring to the European Union in these fields.

2. Challenges in the EU-Turkey Relationship

Both Turkey and the EU are faced with similar global challenges, the solutions to which can be better found by working together. In terms of effective coping with the numerous exigencies of today's world, three areas stand out where a stable partnership between the EU and Turkey would prove particularly fruitful: i) economic competitiveness, ii) managing diversity, and iii) global security.

2.1. Challenge # 1: Economic Competitiveness

At the turn of the millennium, Europe set itself an ambitious target of becoming the world's most dynamic and competitive economy by 2010. Given Europe's sluggish productivity and GDP growth rates in the recent years, especially compared to the emerging giants such as China and India, today Europe looks very far from reaching its objective.

In contrast to the European economic slowdown, Turkey has made a remarkable progress since 2001 both in terms of sustaining high levels of economic growth and achieving macroeconomic stability. The inflation rates have been reduced to single digits; the interest rates as well as public sector deficit and debt have been lowered to sustainable levels. At the same time, the Turkish economy managed to grow constantly: by 7.6 per cent in 2005 and at an annual average rate of 4.3 per cent for the last 15 years.

Turkey did not only achieve stable and high GDP growth, but also improved its levels of productivity at a noteworthy pace. According to the recent survey of Economist Intelligence Unit presented in *Global Competitiveness Report 2006*, Turkey's ranking in Global Competitiveness Index improved to 59 in 2006 from 71 just a year before.

The robust growth accompanied by macroeconomic stability contributed to a healthy investment environment in Turkey with a result of a historical high of 9.7 billion USD worth of Foreign Direct Investment flowing to Turkey in 2005. This represents an amount six times higher than the yearly average of FDI received by Turkey over the previous decade. In the first 8 months of this year, the FDI flowing into Turkey has been 12.4 billion USD and is expected to reach 20 billion USD by the end of the year. Now, as UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2006* indicates, Turkey is ranked 22nd most attractive destination for FDI in the world, up from being the 35th in 2005. Among the emerging markets, Turkey is now the 7th most attractive FDI destination.

All these positive developments underline the vitality of the Turkish economy and its potential for bringing much-needed dynamism to the slow-growing EU economy. Turkey now enjoys a big, growing, stable market with a steadily increasing GDP, an export-oriented industrial economy and rapidly developing information society. What adds to this picture is the status of human capital, a crucial factor of production and growth in contemporary economies and Turkey has a very important comparative advantage in this regard. Continuous enhancement of human capital helps to provide the current and future labor force with necessary skills and facilitates the adoption of new technologies, underpinning the conditions for a sustained economic growth. Therefore, it is now widely accepted that the growth in human capital, achieved by correct educational and training policies, accompanied by favorable demographic trends, stand out as one of the most indispensable tools of socio-economic development.

At the moment, around 20 per cent of the Turkish population is below the age of 10 and as demographic trends show, by 2020 the percentage of the working age population to the rest will reach optimal levels. If Turkey manages to enhance this "demographic gift" with correct educational policies and investments, the Turkish human capital will be the driving force of sustained economic growth and structural change, not only domestically but also regionally. Increases in human capital would also facilitate a faster convergence with the EU.

In comparison to aging Europe, Turkey is not only rich in human energy, but it also plays a critical role for Europe with regards to natural energy

resources. It is well-known that the demand for energy in Europe is increasing day by day. Especially the proportion of natural gas within the total energy consumption is growing very rapidly relative to other energy sources. In fact, as a recent study shows, the European need for natural gas will increase by 160% until 2030.³ Today Russia is the leading provider of Europe's natural gas demands. This over-dependence proves problematic in several ways: First, considering the rapid increase in demand, the Russian supplies emerge as increasingly inadequate. Findings reveal that while in the year 2000, 67% of European gas imports came from Russia, in the year 2020 this rate will inevitably fall down to 35%.⁴ In this respect, the need for the diversification of supply sources, particularly those from Central Asia and the Middle East, constitutes a critical concern. Second, this situation points to the necessity of diversification of transit paths to ensure safer access to energy. At the same time, the increasing dependence on natural gas is an incentive for the search for alternative energy sources.

Given this background, it becomes apparent that both Turkey and Europe share a common interest in building a closer cooperation with regards to the area of energy security, both in terms of diversification of supplies and of access. Turkey is positioned as an energy corridor not only linking the East to West, but also the North to South, channeling the Caspian and the Middle Eastern energy to Europe and to world markets. Thus, Turkey is already an important hub of energy distribution and its relevance is continuing to grow as new multinational projects, which will have geopolitical repercussions for decades to come, are becoming realized.

The newly functional Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipe-line is a case in point. The 1,730 kilometer-long pipeline transports Azeri crude oil to Turkey's Ceyhan port via Georgia with an annual capacity of 50 million metric tons, which roughly amounts to 1 billion barrels per day. What is also particularly important about BTC is that it is indeed independent from the control of OPEC countries and Russia.

Another significant multinational project, Nabucco, foresees the distribution of the Caspian natural gas to Europe via Turkey, linking Central Asian natural gas reserves with Central European countries. Nabucco

³ European Energy and Transport Trends to 2030. [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/energy_transport/figures/trends_2030/1_pref_en.pdf].

⁴ M. Hafner: *Future Natural Gas Supply Options and Supply Costs for Europe*, [europa.eu.int/comm/energy/en/gas_single_market/workshop_2002_11/external_commission/10.pdf] and *Russian Energy Strategy in 2003* [www.mte.gov.ru/files/103/1354.strategy.pdf].

Company Pipeline Study GmbH was founded in June 2004 and the state-owned gas companies of Greece and Turkey announced their interest to start the construction of the first stage of the pipeline, which will have the capacity to carry 31 billion cubic meters of gas annually. Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Iraq, Egypt and maybe Iran are among the candidate source countries.⁵ One other project worth mentioning relates to the extension of currently active Blue Stream natural gas pipeline, now transporting Russian natural gas to Turkey. The project involves the extension of the line to Greece, Italy and France and also building a parallel line to connect Russian gas to Israel city of Ashkalon. The Blue Stream pipeline has the capacity to pump 3.2 billion cubic meters of gas annually, and enjoys the potential to more than quadruple that amount.⁶

It is estimated that with the completion of the pipeline projects, Turkey's Ceyhan port will become the new Rotterdam for transportation of energy resources to world markets.⁷ Hence, Turkey as a future member of the EU would support European energy security both in terms of diversification of supplies and access routes.

2.2. Challenge # 2: Managing Diversity

From its start, the European Union has been a visionary project of achieving 'unity in diversity' by bringing various nationalities and cultures to work together towards common objectives of peace and prosperity. While on the one hand the European project is trying to progress by espousing the values of multiculturalism, on the other hand our contemporary world is marked by an increasing tension between different religious and cultural world views. A quick glance at the current global setting suggests that one of the major assets of the Union is that it now stands out as the strongest candidate to set an example of successful coexistence.

The Turkish accession into the EU would further strengthen Europe's global soft power and substantiate the intercultural dialogue between the Christian and Muslim populations. In return, the European Union membership would irrevocably consolidate Turkish democracy and refute the claim that Islam and democracy cannot coexist. There are already more than 15 million

⁵ Available at: [<http://www.botas.gov.tr/eng/projects/allprojects/bulgaria.asp>].

⁶ Available at: [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4445158.stm>].

⁷ See the article "A. Çalık: *Ceyhan yeni Rotterdam olacak*, *Radical*, 23 June 2006. [<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=190966>].

Muslims living within the borders of the EU and their numbers are increasing daily. Thus, Islam is increasingly an integral part of the European culture. Given this perspective, the joining of Turkey to the European family would also send a signal to the European Muslims that their cultural values are compatible with the Union.

The current Turkish government has been active in promoting Turkey's role to foster respect and dialogue between Islamic and Western societies. To this end in November 2005, the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Spain launched a UN-backed *Alliance of Civilizations* Project with an objective to develop instruments and platforms to reduce misunderstanding between Islamic and Christian cultures and to fight extremism, intolerance and terrorism. Within the framework of intercultural dialogue, the successful integration of Turkey into the EU, the integration of a secular but Muslim country, which embraces common European values such as respect for human dignity and rights, rule of law, would set an example of peaceful co-existence in the divided and problematic world that we currently live in.

2.3. Challenge # 3: Global Security

A quick glance at the regions surrounding Europe also suggests that the Turkish and European interests converge with regard to the security questions involving areas such as the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East. In a report entitled "Turkey as Bridgehead and Spearhead – Integrating EU and Turkish Foreign Policy", Emerson and Tocci conclude that "Turkey stands to be an unequivocal asset for the EU's external policies" based on a combination of "objective factors" and "normative arguments".⁸ Some of the stated factors include "Turkey's role of a geographical hub for regional cooperation" and her positioning to become a "forward base for the EU's security and defense policy, for military logistics and the credibility of the EU's presence in the region". Emerson and Tocci's analysis shows that the EU and Turkish foreign policies are convergent and complementary in the regions of the Balkans, the Black Sea, Central Asia, the Mediterranean, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. As for the foreign policy vis-à-vis the US and the rest of the Middle East, the paper argues that the Turkish and EU positions are increasingly becoming convergent and complementary.

⁸ M. Emerson, N.Tocci: *Turkey as Bridgehead and Spearhead – Integrating EU and Turkish Foreign Policy*, Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Turkey in Europe Monitor No.7, July 2004.

In fact, Turkey, a reliable NATO ally since 1952, already contributes to the European security and defense policy through an agreement, which allows for the participation of non-EU NATO allies in the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Within this framework, Turkey has so far participated in all EU-led military operations, with the exception of the operation in the Republic of Congo. Given Turkey's strategic location and long-standing ties with the neighboring countries, Turkey supports the EU efforts to stabilize the highly volatile regions, which indeed constitute the locus of Europe's main security concerns such as terrorism and illegal trafficking of drugs, arms and people.

3. Turkish Perspectives on the EU Membership:

While it is very important to see the strategic implications of the Turkish accession into the EU in a larger global context, it is equally important to try to understand why so many people both in the EU and Turkey fail to do so. All the recent public opinion surveys reveal a declining support for the enlargement process in the European Union, as well as in the candidate countries. The following part will address this issue in more detail.

3.1. Turkish Public Opinion and the EU Membership

Traditionally, the overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens have been supportive of the Turkish membership to the EU, where approval rates stood at around 60 to 70 per cent during the period prior to 2005. In terms of socioeconomic status, the support for the EU has been higher among the better educated, the economically better-off and the less religiously inclined segments of the Turkish population. As one analyst suggests, in a certain way, the objective of the EU accession has been "the glue that binds together Turkey's key groups: the Muslim democrats, arch-secularists, the armed forces and the business".⁹

However, as it is the case with almost all candidate countries, the Turkish public support for the EU has been constantly declining since the start of accession negotiations on 3 October 2005. According to the Eurobarometer 65

⁹ H. Grabbe: *From Drift to Strategy: why the EU should start accession talks with Turkey*, http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_turkey_hg_july04.pdf.

of Spring 2006, the percentage of the Turkish population who saw EU membership as a “good thing” dropped down to 44% in 2006 compared to 55% in the fall of 2005. In fact, a more recent survey shows that absolute support for Turkey’s EU membership is now down to 32.2% from 67.5 in 2004.¹⁰ According to this study, 33.3 per cent of the population are indifferent to the membership, while 25.6 per cent are against (in 2002, 17.9 per cent were against the membership).

The decline in the Turkish support for the EU membership for the most part can be attributed to a parallel fall in the trust for the Union. An overwhelming majority, 78 per cent of the respondents of A&G research, state that they no longer trust the Union and 76.5 per cent believe even tougher new preconditions will be put forward to block the Turkish accession. The decline in trust levels is also apparent in the Eurobarometer 65 survey results where there is a noteworthy drop in the trust felt in Turkey for the European Commission and the European Parliament.

Among the reasons cited for the rise in distrust is the European position vis-à-vis the issue of Cyprus and Armenia, as well as counterproductive anti-Turkish accession statements of some European decision-makers. Of course, low levels of information among the Turkish public on how the EU works¹¹ add to this bleak picture. Due to lack of understanding of the EU structure, Turks are often incapable of distinguishing between the personal or national statements of European leaders and the joint statements made on behalf of the EU.

As the Turks feel that the EU accession negotiations so far have brought many more sticks than carrots, the overall image of the EU is increasingly weakened in Turkey, where 43 per cent declare to regard the EU positively in 2006 in comparison to 60 per cent in autumn 2005. For the Turkish people, the EU’s positive image is linked, although to a lesser extent, to three major reasons: economic prosperity (35% in spring 2006 and 41% in autumn 2005), social protection (21% in 2006 and 32% in autumn 2005) and peace (24% in 2006 and 23% in autumn 2005), followed by democracy (18% in spring 2006 and 19% in autumn 2005) and cultural diversity (16% in spring 2006 and 19% in autumn 2005).

¹⁰ The research was conducted by a Turkish research company A&G on 23–24 September 2006 in 32 Turkish provinces through face-to-face interviews with 2408 people. The research question asked whether or not the respondent would agree with the following statement: “Turkey must absolutely become an EU member.”

¹¹ As Eurobarometer 65 illustrates, only 46 per cent of the Turkish public feels that they know how the EU works.

3.2. The Turkish Political Class and the EU Integration

The European accession has been an indispensable objective of the Turkish political class, both of the left and the right, for the last 40 years. However, it has been the centre-right AKP government which has shown the most decisive political will to undertake comprehensive reforms to meet the Copenhagen criteria. While the espousal of EU-related reform process has extended the support base of AKP to include more Western-oriented citizens and helped them to make peace with the republican institutions, it also has put AKP at the centre of nationalist critiques.

Although currently none of the major opposition parties officially adopt a Euro-rejectionist position, they nevertheless exploit the issue of accession negotiations to gain ground vis-à-vis the AKP. The main parties of opposition, the centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP), the centre-right True Path Party (DYP), the Motherland Party (ANAP), and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) join their forces in criticizing AKP's European policies, which they judge to be too yielding to European requests. As survey results show, nationalist feelings are in general on the rise among the Turkish population due to a combination of factors such as the re-emergence of PKK terrorism and the recent international political maneuvers surrounding the issues of Cyprus and Armenia. Given the current tense setting and the declining public support for the European cause, AKP government, which is to face general elections in November 2007, has been treading a fine line between continuing the negotiation process and responding to its adversaries' claims on "selling out the country." Thus, despite the fact that Turkey's integration into Europe has been the longest lasting political objective of the Republican era, at the current stage the Turkish political scene suffers from a lack of leadership rallying behind the European project.

3.3. The Business Community, Civil Society and the EU Integration

The Turkish business community has been one of the most influential players in forging a closer relationship between Turkey and the EU. From the initiation of association talks back in 1960s to date, the support of the Turkish business community to the European cause has been more pronounced than any other advocacy group. Turkish business associations were the first ones to try to explain both at home and abroad the benefits of Turkish membership to the EU. As early as 1965, the business community set up Economic

Development Foundation to join in their forces to foster a better understanding of Europe in Turkey and vice versa. The positive outcome of the Customs Union between Turkey and the EU (effective since the beginning of 1996) for the Turkish companies and larger corporations has further strengthened the business support for the EU integration process, which became institutionalized through the activities of leading employee confederations such as TÜSİAD and TOBB as well as the principal trade unions such as DİSK and Hak-İş.

The efforts of the Turkish business community have constituted an example of the significant role that the Turkish civil society has played in facilitating the start of accession negotiations mainly through lobbying and awareness-raising activities carried out both in Turkey and in Europe. From where we are standing today, it is still the Turkish civil society led by the business community who are in the front line of the support for Turkish entry into the EU.

4. European Public Opinion and Enlargement

Among the European populations too is a prevalent ‘enlargement fatigue’ and this uneasiness becomes even more pronounced when it comes to the case of Turkey. According to a Special Barometer 255 entitled “Attitudes Towards European Union Enlargement”, the fieldwork for which was conducted between March-May 2006 and the results were published in July 2006, 45 per cent of the Europeans were in favor of the EU enlargement in general, whereas 39 per cent were in favor of Turkish accession to the EU, even if Turkey complied with all conditions set by the EU.

The European public opinion is very much divided on the issue of Turkey, varying dramatically from one country to another: Austria, Germany, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg are the leading countries of opposition, whereas in Spain, the UK, Sweden, Slovenia, Poland, Netherlands and Denmark the majorities support the Turkish accession. As a general trend, the opposition is higher among the old members of the Union (49 per cent) in comparison to the 10 New Members States (40 per cent). The two new member states, Bulgaria and Romania, are in favor of the Turkish membership. With regards to the Baltic States, the support levels also vary: In Latvia, 35 per cent are in favor (47 per cent against), in Lithuania 33 per

cent are in favor (42 per cent against); while 47 per cent of Estonians are in favor and only 23 per cent are against.

As the survey illustrates, one of the major reasons behind rather low rates of approval is again the lack of information: 68 per cent of the respondents declare that they are not well informed about enlargement, whereas only 30 per cent feel informed. To add to the case, even if they are more informed, the Europeans in general (with the exception of Poland and Malta out of the EU-25) know and hear more about the problems associated with enlargement rather than the benefits.

Economic fears stand out as the leading stumbling block to the support for enlargement, particularly in terms of delocalization and labor immigration. Moreover, Europeans do not perceive enlargement as a beneficial tool for better managing globalization and for enhancing Europe's role as a key player in global politics. In fact, many fears associated with the process of enlargement seem to relate to the fear of globalization among the European citizens.

5. Conclusions

As the above picture clearly illustrates, neither the majority of Turks nor the Europeans perceive enlargement as a win-win situation. The survey results show that both sides find the membership mostly in the interest of the other party, whereas only 30 per cent of Turks and 20 per cent of the European Union citizens believe that enlargement is of mutual interest to both.¹² Given the insufficient popular levels of information on the merits of enlargement – realized and potential, there is an even more pressing need for explaining to the publics better that enlargement has been part of the solution to many political and economic concerns to a much greater extent than it has been part of the problem. So far, both the European and Turkish decision-makers have failed in this regard.

The above-presented discussion has been a modest attempt to point out the fact that as problems that threaten international peace and prosperity can be tackled much more effectively by governance structures that function above

¹² Special Eurobarometer: *Attitudes Towards EU Enlargement*, European Commission, July 2006.

the national level, on many fronts Europe needs Turkey as much as Turkey needs Europe. Cross-border problems such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, climate change, economic slowdown, aging are all global risks. Mutual needs can be met only through building a stable partnership between the EU and Turkey, through which Turkey becomes fully integrated into the European structure. The attainment of such an objective requires primarily sound, prudent and visionary opinion leadership in Turkey, as well as in Europe, much more than before.

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