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Turkey's Full EU Membership – Still a Realistic Perspective?

The question whether Turkey should accede to full EU membership can be discussed from two different angles, the first focusing on Turkey itself and its maturity, willingness and commitment with regard to EU accession, and the second addressing the EU and its political, institutional and financial capacity to integrate newcomers of the size and importance of Turkey.

In the last few weeks Turkey, through the open demonstration of its deep inner conflicts, has contributed to the discussion of the first type, bolstering anew the widespread and frequently uttered doubts about the country's suitability to become a full member of the European Union.

Indeed, recent events point at delicate issues in Turkish politics and raise questions as to the reliability of democratic rule in Turkey. Trouble began when, last April, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his moderately Islamicist AKP, which holds a strong majority in the Parliament, reached out for the country's Presidency. As a reaction, the very powerful military threatened to intervene in order to defend the separation of religion and state, a founding principle of modern Turkish statehood and the main legacy of Kemal Atatürk. The military were strongly supported by the secular and/or nationalistic segment of the party system. Huge demonstrations took place, gathering hundreds of thousands of mainly young people who expressed their rejection of the creeping Islamisation of Turkey. When Abdullah Gül, foreign minister and the right hand of Erdogan, failed to win the poll because of objections by the Constitutional Court, the Parliament, with its clear AKP majority, decided to abrogate the constitution in order to install direct election of the next President and a shorter term of five instead of seven years. National and international media demanded to know the legitimacy of such a decision. Indeed, it is questionable whether a Parliament close to the end of its term with general elections scheduled for July 22 still has the right to take such far-reaching decisions. As expected, outgoing President Ahmet Necdet Sezer vetoed the constitutional amendment. The Parliament reacted by voting in favour once again. If Sezer now chooses to submit the issue to a referendum, which could not take place before October, it seems most probable that voters would accept the AKP project because surveys credit the ruling party with a large majority. The recent pressure by the military for action against the Kurdish PKK in Northern Iraq should therefore be read as an attempt to confuse the situation further.

It is certainly too early to speak of a crisis or of a new political instability in Turkey. There is still the option that the main political actors will succeed in finding an acceptable solution to the conflict without further turmoil. Nevertheless, these recent events prompt new questions concerning Turkey's application for EU membership. Is it really guaranteed that the country is mature enough to join the Union? Does the military's role actually match modern Western patterns? And what about Turkey's commitment to the large reform programme which must be accomplished before EU accession?

These doubts also refer to other Turkish "sins" such as its non-compliance with European rules in the case of Cyprus, which at the end of 2006 caused the freezing of the EU-Turkey accession negotiations, or its refusal to abolish the famous article 301 of the constitution which stipulates severe persecution for any attack on Turkishness, a constitutional norm which represents a serious restriction on free expression of opinion. Thus, as far as the Turkish side of the question whether the country should gain full EU membership is concerned, the picture is rather gloomy (or, to say the least, uncertain).

When we turn to the European Union's side of the problem, the picture becomes much more unequivocal, although not at all in a positive sense for Turkish EU membership.

Indeed, things have evolved rather quickly in the last ten or twelve months, changing the situation substantially. First, as mentioned above, in December 2006 the Council partially suspended the negotiations with Turkey as a reaction to its refusal to open its harbours and airports to ships and planes from Cyprus. The EU is demanding Turkish compliance with European rules as a strict precondition for the opening of new chapters. Turkey, however, has made no changes whatsoever to its attitudes, so that we have a nearly complete deadlock in the negotiation process.

Second, the EU's position in general concerning further enlargements has finally, and sensibly, become more prudent and hesitating. As a reaction to the fading acceptance of new entries among the EU population – one of the main reasons for the French and Dutch “No” to the Constitutional Treaty in summer 2005 – the European Council decided in June 2006 to give greater consideration to the Union's capacity to integrate new member states. The Commission was asked to elaborate on this. Its report, delivered in November 2006, defines this capacity as being composed of three factors: institutions, common policies and the budget. The Commission has promised that any new application for EU membership will be accompanied by an assessment of the impacts of its accession on EU policies, and it recommends that the EU be “cautious in assuming any new commitments”. Although this primarily addresses countries other than Turkey and Croatia, i.e. mainly the Western Balkan states, it seems obvious that the Commission is aware of the dangers the EU would undergo without a change in its enlargement policies. The European Council adopted the new strategy in December 2006.

But, thirdly, the clearest sign of Turkey's fading chances of becoming a member of the EU one day comes from France's new president, Nicolas Sarkozy. For several years he has openly opposed Turkish accession to the EU and even dared to contradict his former “boss”, Jacques Chirac, on this issue. It is, however, not yet foreseeable when and how Sarkozy will take action to stop Turkey on its way into the EU. One possibility would be simply to oppose the opening of any new negotiation chapter, because such a decision requires unanimity. However, diplomats say that Sarkozy will probably not do this. Determined to achieve a treaty reform as soon as possible, together with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, he will probably abstain from challenging the supporters of Turkey, such as the United Kingdom and the Commission's president, Barroso. And indeed, there is no need for Sarkozy to force the line. The French constitution now prescribes that any new EU enlargement (after the accession of Croatia) must be approved by a referendum. The French, however, together with the Germans, are most reluctant concerning further enlargements, especially with regard to Turkey. Thus, in the foreseeable future any such referendum would fail in France. Come to that, support for Turkish EU membership is hardly stronger in other EU countries, with the last Eurobarometer survey indicating only 28% approval within the EU27.

Considering, furthermore, the present crisis of the EU and the undeniable tensions between some of the old and the new member states due to the huge differences in wealth, values, political orientation and traditions, it seems to be a dangerous strategy to stick to the idea of full Turkish EU membership. Since the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the EU's capacity to integrate new states is seriously under stress and it is barely able to accomplish the uniting of the existing Union. Although a lot of work had already been done in this direction, which makes it appropriate to speak of a European success story, great challenges still lie ahead. Would it therefore not be irresponsible to put these achievements at risk? It seems that the moment has come to abandon the illusion that the EU could – even in a medium-term perspective – integrate such a huge and difficult country as Turkey. It is therefore time to look seriously at alternatives for European-Turkish relations.

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