

RISING NATIONALISM AND THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

Nationalist feeling has been rising and support for Turkish membership of the European Union has been falling as conditions that led to a decline in levels of nationalism at the end of the 1990s have changed. The rocky path of the accession process since 2004 and an extended domestic political atmosphere of polarization and crisis have further provoked nationalist feeling and transformed much of it into anti-EU feeling. Global economic troubles and the prospect that EU negotiations could be suspended over the AKP closure case could lead to further increases in levels of nationalism.

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Turkey is a country whose modern political culture has always been heavily marked by nationalism. Recently it has become a cliché to say that levels of Turkish nationalism are rising. This was particularly true in the weeks and months after the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink by an ultranationalist teenager in January 2007, when a flurry of articles on the phenomenon appeared in the international press.¹ While international media interest has declined, some commentators argue that the atmosphere has if anything becomes more nationalistic since then.² This apparent rise in nationalist feeling has been accompanied by a major decline in levels of support for Turkish membership of the European Union.³

Rising and Falling Nationalism: the 1990s

What is the evidence that nationalism is rising in Turkey? In addition to increasing Euroskepticism, levels of anti-Americanism have risen substantially in recent years, to the extent that anti-American sentiment in Turkey as measured by opinion polls is amongst the highest in the world.⁴ 50 percent of respondents to an opinion poll published in March 2007 said they thought nationalism was rising in general, and 37 percent said they generally or sometimes felt more nationalistic than previously.⁵

A series of murders of religious and ethnic minority figures have widely been taken as signs of increasing Turkish nationalism. In addition to Hrant Dink, a Catholic priest was killed in Trabzon in 2006, while three Christian missionaries were murdered in Malatya in April the same year.

The return to parliament of the conservative-nationalist National Movement Party (MHP) in the July 2007 elections with 14.3 percent of the vote (compared to 8.3 percent in 2002) has also been taken as evidence of rising nationalism. The opposition Republican People's Party's nationalist rhetoric has increased while the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which traces its history back to the "Turkish-Islamist synthesis" of the Islamist but also strongly nationalist National View movement (albeit its most liberal wing) is increasingly willing to act in a "shamelessly nationalistic" fashion.⁶ Thus there is

¹ See for example "Waving Atatürk's Flag", *The Economist*, 8 March 2007.

² Over the last year the poisonous ultranationalist air that has shrouded Turkey has thickened further. Turkey's conspiracy-prone public debate continues to produce an increasingly anti-European, anti-Kurdish, anti-Armenian and anti-liberal nationalism. Ömer Taşpınar, "Nostalgia for the Old AK Party," *Today's Zaman*, 21 January 2008.

³ Numerous polls and surveys have indicated this. For analysis of the latest opinion poll indicating a decline in support, see Gareth Jenkins, "Turkish survey reveals decline in support for EU and AK", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5 No. 90 (12 May 2008). For summary of some other polls see Mehmet Bardakçı, "Euroskepticism in Turkey", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9 No. 4, 2007.

⁴ See for example the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Project, in which 83 percent of Turks surveyed were reported to hold unfavourable attitudes towards the U.S., the second highest level of all countries surveyed. <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=256>.

⁵ "Turkish Nationalism Partly Response To EU Ostracism –Poll", *Associated Press*, 12 March 2007.

⁶ Ömer Taşpınar, "Nostalgia for the Old AK Party," *Today's Zaman*, 21 January 2008.

a situation in which three of the four major parties represented in parliament could be described as Turkish nationalist or containing nationalist wings; the fourth is of course Kurdish nationalist. Demonstrations against the PKK that in some instances have led to clashes between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists (albeit so far relatively minor ones), a new phenomenon that has led to fears of Turkish-Kurdish ethnic mob violence in the future, are a more recent sign of rising nationalism.

Why might nationalism, and in particular anti-Western, anti-EU and xenophobic forms of nationalism be rising in Turkey? In fact this is not the first time in recent history that nationalism has been observed to be rising in Turkey; a similar phenomenon was observed in the 1990s. To understand why nationalism might be increasing now, it is informative to look at what happened then.

Ebru Bulut argues that popular nationalism rose in Turkey in the mid-to-late 1990s as the military and bureaucratic elites appealed to populist nationalism by highlighting perceived threats to Turkey's national and territorial unity posed by both political Islam and Kurdish nationalism.⁷ The conflict in the south-east with the PKK, which peaked in the mid-1990s, and the growing power of political Islam that culminated in the Refah Party winning the largest share of the vote in the 1996 elections and entering the government were the manifestations of the perceived threat. The military and its allies were aided in their appeals to nationalist support by the fact that the major political parties, struggling to cope with the challenges, effectively abdicated responsibility for policy-making and entered into a "cartel system" that subordinated them to state institutions, in particular the military, in many policy areas.

It is clear why the violence in the southeast might have exacerbated Turkish nationalistic feelings in the 1990s. However something that Bulut touches on (rather than explaining in detail) is why the same should have been true of political Islam. After all, while pan-Islamism is clearly incompatible with nationalism, we have already seen that the Islamism of the Turkish National View movement, from which the Refah Party descended was a synthesis between Islamism and an uncompromising form of Turkish nationalism. A partial answer to this is that for Kemalists, secularism is inextricably bound up with Turkish nationalism and any threat to the Kemalist model for the place of religion in society is seen as a threat to the Republic and thus the nation. However I would also argue that because almost all Turkish political parties and trends incorporate nationalism as an important part of their agendas, any increase in political tensions that leads to an increasingly politicized national mood is also likely to lead to increasing appeals to nationalism. That is, political tensions are likely to give rise to an increase in public manifestations of nationalist feeling.

⁷ Ebru Bulut, "The social grammar of populist nationalism." In Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*. Ed. London: IB Tauris (2006), pp. 125-135.

Several events at the turn of the millennium led to major changes in these circumstances that had previously generated high levels of popular nationalism according to Bulut, and nationalism was not as pronounced. The economic crisis of 2001 discredited both the “cartel parties” while the state of the economy, argues Bulut, took the place of the Kurdish and Islamist “threats” as Turkey’s most pressing concern in most people’s minds and led to social fatigue, undermining nationalist mobilization.⁸ This was reinforced by the weakening of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the late 1990s and the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, which led to a PKK ceasefire and an effective suspension of the conflict in the south-east for five years.⁹ Meanwhile Turkey saw an apparent “normalisation” of political Islam, in the shape of the splintering of Turkey’s main Islamist movement into a fringe traditionally Islamist party and the much more popular Justice and Development Party (AKP) which appeared to renounce Islamism. AKP was widely thought to be intent on avoiding clashes with non-elected state elites and seeking consensus,¹⁰ leading temporarily to reduced political tensions. One might also emphasise that the state’s much-criticised response to the 1999 İzmit earthquake (and failure to clamp down on widespread corruption that led to developers ignoring building codes before the earthquake) severely discredited state institutions and the “cartel” parties, while the aid supplied by several foreign countries, notably Greece, served to undercut some of the prejudices and attitudes of conspiracy and victimisation characteristic of ultra-nationalism.

2004-2008: Changing Conditions

Since 2004, the circumstances described above changed again and in several important respects swung back towards the conditions prevalent in the 1990s. While the effects of the 2001 crisis continue to be felt by many Turks who still face tough economic circumstances, the economy has grown rapidly and consistently. The economy no longer crowds out other concerns and perceived threats. Meanwhile in 2004 the PKK abandoned its ceasefire and clashes between the group and the military have escalated in frequency every year since then, reaching a peak in October and November 2007 and prompting anti-terrorism protests, often strongly nationalist in character. While the violence in the south-east continues to be on a far smaller scale than in the 1990s, another Kurdish group possibly related to the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons or Liberation Hawks (TAK) undertook a significant terrorist bombing campaign in Western Turkey in 2005 and 2006, bringing the conflict closer to home for some. Many Turks regarded these developments as at least partly a consequence of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the inability or refusal of the U.S. and Iraqi Kurdish authorities to do anything about the presence of PKK camps and infrastructure in Northern Iraq. The disparity between U.S. support of Israel in its 2006 conflict

⁸ Ebru Bulut, “The social grammar of populist nationalism.” In Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*. Ed. London: IB Tauris (2006), p. 134.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

against Hizbullah and its lack of support for a Turkish attack in the PKK in Iraq was noted, fuelling anti-Western nationalism. Occasionally successful efforts to persuade legislatures in several Western states to classify events during the First World War as the genocide of the Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman further inflamed feelings.

Meanwhile political tensions increased as the AKP grew more willing to challenge the state elite, in particular on the question of who would replace out-going Kemalist President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2007. Tensions increased further following the AKP's resounding victory at the polls in July that year. The drafting of a new constitution and the related issue of the ban on female students wearing the Muslim headscarf at universities created heated debate. Opponents to the AKP including the military have framed their opposition in explicitly nationalist tones, as can be seen for example by the vast numbers of Turkish flags carried at anti-AKP demonstrations in 2007 and 2008 and the anti-foreign/anti-Western sentiment expressed at some of the rallies.

The insolubility of Kemalist secularism and nationalism and the tendency of political tensions to nationalise the political mood were demonstrated.

Nationalism and the EU

Nevertheless this does not fully explain why support for EU membership should be falling. Turkish nationalism has not historically been incompatible with support for EU membership. It seems likely that support for both the strongly nationalistic MHP and the CHP¹¹ is highly correlated with Turkish nationalist attitudes. Yet according to a 2003 opinion poll, majorities of both Turks who claimed to hold relatively high nationalist attitudes and substantial majorities of supporters of both CHP and MHP said they would vote in favour of full Turkish membership of the EU (despite the fact that the MHP's official line is hostile to Turkish integration into Europe, denying what even the CHP would see as Turkey's westward or European destiny).¹² Support for EU accession was substantially higher amongst supporters of those parties than those supporting the AKP.¹³ Indeed the CHP long regarded itself as the standard bearer of Turkey's

¹¹ Though the ideology of the Republican People's Party (CHP) is more generally identified with secularism and, at least nominally, social democracy, than with the MHP's ultranationalism, it is essentially devoted to a secularist-nationalist reading of Kemalism and is routinely described as nationalist and even fanatically nationalist, being devoted to a "non-racist but defensive anti-imperialist and explicitly unifying (homogenizing) nationalism of the 1930s (that) has survived till the present." See Beatrice Hendrich, "Post-nationalist semiotics: The Emblem of the Justice and Development Party AKP," in Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*. Ed. London: IB Tauris (2006), pp. 125-135..

¹² Nergis Canefe and Tanıl Bora, "The Intellectual Roots of Anti-European Sentiments in Turkish Politics: The Case of Radical Turkish Nationalism", in Barry Rubin and Ali Çarkoğlu (ed.), *Turkey and the European Union: Domestic Politics, Economic Integration and International Dynamics*, Frank Cass and Co. Ltd New York: NY (2003) p. 127.

¹³ Ali Çarkoğlu, "Who Wants Full EU Membership? Characteristics of Public Support for EU Membership", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, pp. 174 and 181.

EU bid. However rising nationalism has correlated with a substantial drop in support for the EU process.

The explanation for this is likely that EU accession represents a potential source of national pride for nationalist-minded Turks and that Kemalist nationalists in particular “strongly endorse Turkey’s EU aspiration as it conforms to the westernization ideal of the Turkish Republic”¹⁴ – or at least they have done so under the right circumstances (such as when the differences between their conceptions of “Westernization” and that of the EU have been less apparent). In recent years however, far from representing a potential source of pride for Turks, accession has seemed like a far-distant prospect and the process has seemed more like one of humiliation, allowing rival conceptions of Europe as Turkey’s historic enemy to come to the fore.¹⁵

The messy opening of those talks and the open hostility of several EU member states, in particular during the referenda on the EU Constitution led many Turks to believe that the EU did not really want Turkey as a member at all and has helped poison the atmosphere.¹⁶ The EU’s explicit insistence that accession was not a guaranteed outcome of the process intensified this, leading Turks to believe they were being treated differently from other accession candidates.¹⁷ Further developments such as the partial suspension of the accession process in December 2006 because of the Turkish refusal to open its ports to Greek Cypriot shipping have further slowed the process down and embittered Turks. The EU’s decision to admit Cyprus to the EU in spite of its failure to match the Turkish backing for the 2004 Annan reunification plan is seen as hypocrisy by Turks.

Indeed the handling of the accession process itself appears to be one of drivers of rising nationalism, accounting for the popularity of a specifically Eurosceptic nationalism. In the aforementioned poll published in March 2007, a plurality of respondents (33.8 percent) cited the behaviour of the EU towards Turkey as the main reason for rising nationalism in the country, while more than 60 percent cited this as either the first or second most important reason.¹⁸ Meanwhile as the AKP has become increasingly identified with the EU and reliant on EU support for reforms antithetical to its domestic opponents, their nationalism has taken on an increasing anti-EU slant.

This rise in Eurosceptic nationalism has proven damaging for the reform process. The AKP had initially made strenuous efforts to get the accession process underway, despite the nationalist roots of many of its MPs. This was likely linked to the fact

¹⁴ Mehmet Bardakçı, “Euroscepticism in Turkey”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9 No. 4, 2007, p. 121.

¹⁵ Claire Visier, “Euroscepticism in Turkey: European Ambiguity Fuels Nationalism”, *Institut Européen de la Méditerranée* 2006, available at <http://www.iemed.org/annuaire/2006/aarticles/aVisier.pdf>.

¹⁶ Burak Akçapar, “*Turkey’s New European Era: Foreign Policy on the Road to EU Membership*” Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield (2007).

¹⁷ Mehmet Bardakçı, “Euroscepticism in Turkey”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9 No. 4, 2007, p. 118.

¹⁸ “Turkish Nationalism Partly Response To EU Ostracism –Poll”, *Associated Press*, 12 March 2007.

that the party leadership felt that the accession process helped it push democratization measures and thus strengthening it *vis-à-vis* its adversaries in the state establishment. The prospect of EU¹⁹-driven social and economic reforms became increasingly appealing to its electoral base, keen both for economic opportunities and to lift restrictions on personal freedoms, at least in respect of their own practices. However as the party became more powerful and well-entrenched it had less need for support and legitimacy derived from the EU. Furthermore the European Court of Human Rights' rejection of a Turkish student's appeal to reverse the ban on female state university students wearing the headscarf likely damaged the appeal of European institutions to AKP supporters.²⁰ Accession seemed like a distant prospect, stalled over Cyprus anyway. The prospect of opening another negotiating chapter or two did not seem enormously appealing especially given the rising appeal of nationalistic rhetoric.

Outlook

The case for the closure of the AKP filed with the Constitutional Court is of interest in this respect. It has had some encouraging implications in the short term in that the AKP now seems to have decided that its self interest is realigned with the accession process. Thus AKP is moving forward with some previously stalled reforms such as amending Article 301, albeit in an arguably half-hearted fashion. Support for the EU seems to have risen amongst AKP supporters²¹ for the same reason, leading to a (probably temporary) reversal in falling levels of support for accession.

The outlook for other conditions affecting levels of Eurosceptic nationalist feeling is mixed. The U.S. provision of intelligence to the Turkish military to facilitate attacks on the PKK may help matters. The improved prospects of a settlement to the Cyprus conflict could go a long way towards assuaging Turkish resentment of how the issue has been handled in the past, but even with the coming to power of a new apparently compromise-minded Cypriot President. On the other hand, there remain enormous challenges to reaching an agreement and another spectacular failure would undoubtedly worsen matters.

Barack Obama, who currently appears to have a strong chance of becoming the next U.S. President, has pledged to support an "Armenian Genocide" resolution if he does. This could of course go the way of many campaign promises in the face of *realpolitik*.

Meanwhile a slowdown in the Turkish economy linked –or perceived to be linked– to the global economic woes and the credit crunch could serve to discredit recent

¹⁹ Ömer Taşpınar, "Nostalgia for the Old AK Party," *Today's Zaman*, 21 January 2008.

²⁰ Mehmet Bardakçı, "Euroskepticism in Turkey", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9 No. 4, 2007 p. 123.

²¹ Gareth Jenkins, "Poll suggests AKP closure case has boosted public support for EU membership", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5 No. 68.

liberalizing economic reforms at home and boost levels of support for populist-nationalist economic policies and parties.

Furthermore popular levels of nationalism do not represent the only threat to the accession process; nationalist-minded institutions also have the power to delay it. There remains the possibility for example that the Constitutional Court, if petitioned to do so by the CHP, could annul reforms to Article 301. Meanwhile many think a desire to cripple the accession process, partly driven by nationalism, underlies the AKP closure case, though such judgments can only be speculative.

The conditions that effect how and when nationalism surfaces in Turkey are multifold and have implications for Turkey's EU accession process. This issue merits close attention in the critical months ahead for the country.