

LOSING TURKEY OR STRATEGIC BLINDNESS?

Negative statements and actions by EU leaders have played a key role in discouraging Turkey. Turkey's recent activism in the Middle East, which is widely misread as a departure from the West is certainly encouraged by the frustrations with the EU. From this vantage point, it is healthier to interpret the dramatically deepened and broadened economic and energy relations between Turkey and Iran (and Russia) in recent weeks and months as Turkey's way of saying "I am here, important and relevant for your policies more than you think!"

Tuncay Babalı*



* Tuncay Babalı holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Houston and MA in international studies and diplomacy from the University of London (SOAS). He is currently a fellow at the Harvard University Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and previously was Counselor at the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C. This article reflects solely the author's views and not necessarily those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.

There is a heated debate within media and academic circles as to whether Turkey is leaving the West and forging closer ties with countries such as Russia and Iran.¹ In order to understand the issue better, one has to understand the background and deep frustration of Turkey with the EU and that though the West may not be losing Turkey, the EU is.

The wider strategic picture should be kept in mind when dealing with Turkey. In his 30 September 2009 speech in Brussels on Transatlantic Relations, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon summarized the issue as follows:

It is always striking when you deal with Turkey that you're dealing with energy, NATO, European Union, the Middle East, Iran, Cyprus, Greece, there's hardly an issue that Turkey isn't related to. And it is our strong belief that Turkey should strengthen its ties with Europe. I think sometimes the debate about Turkey's membership in the European Union gets in the way of the real issue which is Turkey's continued orientation towards the West, relations with the United States and Europe, and regardless of where you come out in terms of actual membership, we should agree that Turkey is a strategic challenge and binding it to the West is an important goal for Europeans and Americans alike.²

Introduction and Some Background Facts

It was exactly 50 years ago that Turkey first asked to join the EU – or, as it was then known, the European Economic Community (EEC). Half a century later, Turkey is still waiting to be let in and 21 other countries have since joined the Union, expanding the club to 27 states today.

First and foremost EU membership is and has always been part of the strategic process of transformation and modernization of Turkey.

¹ Morton Abramowitz and Henri J. Barkey assert, for example, that the Kemalists and the military are convinced of the AKP's designs "to consolidate its position in the Muslim world even at the expense of its traditional alliance with the West." "Turkey's Transformers," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88 Issue 6, (Nov – Dec 2009), pp. 118-128., Soner Çağaptay "Is Turkey Leaving the West?", 26 October 2009. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65634/soner-cagaptay/is-turkey-leaving-the-west>

² <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2009/130145.htm>

Turkey began “westernizing” its economic, political and social structures in the 19th century. Following the First World War and the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, it chose Western Europe as the model for its new secular structure. And, ever since it has closely aligned itself with the West. Atatürk’s legacy and vision was for his nation to reach the level of contemporary civilization. Turkish people associated the EU process with this ultimate goal and embraced it.

As such, Turkey has taken an early interest in the efforts to build a United Europe. Even before the then EEC came into being in 1958, Turkey had become a founding member of the Council of Europe (which is based in Strasbourg) and the OECD, and had become an early member of NATO. All these institutions were devoted –each in its own way– to bringing Europe closer together.

Thus, it is not surprising that Turkey asked to join the EEC in 1959, barely one and a half years after it came into being. Turkey’s EU membership aspiration is not one of coincidence; it is a deliberate choice made by Turkish people, a choice that belongs to the people.

“Turkey’s Quo Vadis” in the EU Accession Process and Danger Ahead!

Key EU member countries such as Germany and France do not portray enthusiasm on behalf of Turkey’s eventual membership and in Turkey, though it may be strong among opinion leaders, support for full membership has waned among the public. Perpetual frustrations are draining patience. Unless the EU can accelerate the negotiation timetable and show some visionary strategic foresight, the West might risk losing Turkey sooner than expected.

In four years of actual accession talks, which started after the EU’s unanimous decision in 2005, Turkey opened only 11 of 35 policy chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, successfully closing just one, on science and research.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has been opposed to Turkey’s entry into the EU based on unwarranted fears. Last year France vetoed the opening of an additional five chapters. Sarkozy’s veto has become a new sign of artificial division between the peoples of Europe on Turkey.

The last five chapters Turkey opened all had benchmarks and Turkey successfully met them, showing political will and determination. “Environment-27”,

“Competition Policy-8” and “Social Policy and Employment-19” are expected to be opened in the coming months. Turkey also expects that the discussions on the ten chapters³ that are still on the Council’s agenda will be finalized and opening benchmarks –if any– communicated to the Turkish government soon.

There are however political obstacles unrelated to the *acquis* regarding chapters: “Energy-15”, “Education and Culture-26” as well as “Economic and Monetary Policy-17”. With regard to these chapters especially, Turkey would like to see France loosen its objection and stop making the Cyprus issue -which has no direct relation to these chapters- an excuse not to open them up for negotiation.

As regards to chapter 15 “Energy”, Turkey has a good level of alignment with the Community *acquis* as stated in the latest “2009 Progress Report” and the “Enlargement Strategy Paper” Progress Report⁴ released by the European Commission on 14 October 2009, as well as the necessary administrative capacity in the energy field. Turkey is technically ready for negotiations regarding this chapter. It is odd that the opening of this chapter is delayed while Europe faces a major energy security challenge and Turkey can make tremendous contributions, as demonstrated by Turkey’s prospective role in the Nabucco Natural Gas Project and efforts to create “the Fourth Main Artery for gas supply” also known as “the Southern Gas Ring to Europe.”

Turkey’s progress in 21 chapters is quite positive. The 2009 Progress Report and Assessment was found, for the first time by the Turkish leadership as “fair and constructive.”⁵

This assessment of the negotiation process demonstrates the fact that Turkey takes its responsibilities in the accession process seriously and it expects that the EU honor its commitments and responsibilities too.

³ These chapters are “Freedom of Movement of Workers-2”, “Fisheries- 13”, “Transport Policy- 14”, “Energy -15”, “Regional Policies and Coordination of Structural Instruments-22”, “Judiciary and Fundamental Rights-23”, “Justice, Freedom and Security-24”, “External Relations-30”, “Foreign, Security and Defence Policy-31”, “Financial and Budgetary Provisions-33”.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_oct_2009_en.htm ; <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/eu-releases-2009-progress-report-for-turkey-1.html>

⁵ “EU Releases 2009 Progress Report for Turkey,” *Anadolu Agency (AA)*, 14 October 2009.

Why is the Process so Slow?

This is partly due to the issue of Cyprus, still divided between Greek and Turkish sides. Eight of the chapters are formally blocked because Turkey refuses to open its ports and airports to traffic from the Greek Cyprus side. Turkey's refusal is a reaction to the previous promises from the EU side that Cyprus and Turkey's accession process would be dealt with separately and that isolation to the North would be lifted. The real reason behind this awkward situation is that European politicians are capitalizing on unsubstantiated domestic fears on the possibility of Turkey's membership to the EU.

According to a report published on 7 September by the panel of European leaders chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari (who also won a Nobel Peace Prize for his work as a mediator in the Kosovo conflict), the Independent Commission on Turkey says that some EU leaders are mining popular fears over the specter of Turkish membership. "Attacks on the EU-Turkey process [have become] a proxy for popular concerns about immigration, worries about jobs, fears of Islam and a general dissatisfaction with the EU", the report says.⁶

Why Turkey's Membership Should Matter?

Turkish accession to the EU is one of the most important political projects of our times. The EU, as the greatest peace project of the last and present centuries will be incomplete without Turkey.

There are many benefits of Turkey's membership, most of which are in fact over-articulated. However, there are some that directly address the crux of the issue of Turkish accession and dismantle any unwarranted worries of a possible future membership. To name a few:

Overlapping interests of Turkey and the EU overlap in a vast geography:

On issues as diverse as the global economic crisis, climate change, energy, Iran, Iraq, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Georgia, Kosovo and others, Turkey's efforts are directed at facilitating dialogue and compromise.

⁶ Martti Ahtisaari "Cold on Turkey," *The New York Times*, 11 September 2009, <http://www.independentcommissionon-turkey.org/>

The new Turkish foreign policy outlook and aspirations to play a more proactive role in its immediate geopolitical neighborhood should be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory, to its more traditional Western strategic alignments. And this approach remains to a great extent compatible with the West's strategic objectives. As the Independent Commission on Turkey report concludes:

There is no other country whose leaders can and do travel so often between capitals as varied as Moscow and Damascus, Tehran and Jerusalem, and be received with respect and be able to advocate important policy goals so widely.⁷

Turkey is also the only country to be simultaneously a member of the Council of Europe, NATO, OECD, G-20 and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

This new positioning does not at all alter Turkey's EU vocation, on the contrary, it creates a more democratic, secular and economically strong regional actor and partner which can be one of the greatest assets to the EU when, and even before, Turkey joins. The recent progress report has also recognized Turkey as a key regional stability contributor. In this area, Turkey, for instance, is playing an important role either as a facilitator or a mediator in:

- Syria and Israel talks,
- Afghanistan and Pakistan rapprochement,
- ISAF Command in Afghanistan (twice and soon for a third time),
- Lebanon and Israel tension,
- Russia and Georgia conflict,
- Syria and Iraq rift,
- Iran and the United States

Turkey is already one of the main contributors to the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) operations in the Balkans, Africa and elsewhere. It is also a participant to EU CFSP positions in most cases.

In addition, the African Union, Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council have established strong relations with Turkey. Apart from membership to the UN

⁷ <http://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/>

Security Council, Turkey will be assuming the respective presidencies of the Council of Europe, of CICA (the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia), and of SEECF (the Southeast European Cooperation Process) in the next three-year period.

The EU's own initiatives like the Union for the Mediterranean, the Black Sea Synergy and Eastern Partnership stand a much better chance of success with Turkey on board.

Dialogue among civilizations and the future of Muslim minorities in Europe:

Turkey's EU membership is also about declaring that tolerance is replacing prejudice. It is about Europe being a timeless and inspirational idea that unites a continent, not one that artificially divides it by religion or ethnicity.

For the first time in centuries there is an opportunity to bring the cultural and religious diversity together and to unite Europe around shared ideals and common goals. Turkey, as a secular democracy with a Muslim majority, has the chance to disprove the theory of a "clash of civilizations". The EU itself admits this fact in its Progress Report and the "Enlargement Strategy Paper" in which it assessed that Turkey plays a key role in enhancing dialogue among civilizations.⁸

Turkey demonstrates that Islam and democracy can co-exist and that culture and religion do not obstruct development and democracy. Turkey put into practice its most important contribution as a "soft power" with the message it delivers by its existence as the only secular (despite its deficiencies) democracy with plausible prospect of becoming full member to 1.5 billion Muslims around the world.⁹

Muslim nations and Europe's own Muslim minorities are consequently closely watching Turkey's accession process. This is also a litmus case for them of whether they will have a future in the EU.¹⁰

⁸ "EU Releases 2009 Progress Report for Turkey," *Anadolu Ajans*, 14 October 2009.

⁹ Malaysia and Indonesia are also democracies with Muslim nations. However, their democracy experience and institutions to support democracy is far behind Turkey.

¹⁰ Soner Çağaptay, "Why Turkey must get in?" *Newsweek*, (15 July 2009). <http://www.newsweek.com/id/206912>

Turkey's economic strength is an added value to the EU:

Turkey is already Europe's sixth, and the world's 17th biggest economy with a market of 72 million.

In OECD Turkey is projected to be the third country in highest economic growth after China and India by 2017. Turkey's per capita GDP almost tripled in the last six years, reaching 10,368 dollars in 2008. The GDP was 746.4 billion dollars in 2008. In Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms per capita income is 13,500 dollars. PPP GDP stands at around one trillion dollars (941 billion in 2007, 958 billion in 2008).¹¹

Between 1999 and 2008, the EU consistently accounted for 56 percent to 58 percent of exports. (56.5 percent in 2008) Total EU imports 40.4 percent; total Asia imports 27 percent).¹²

Turkey continues to attract around ten percent of total FDI inflows to developing economies (22 billion dollars in 2007) and 30 percent of total FDI inflows to emerging Europe. FDI inflow for 2008 is 18 billion dollars.¹³

Turkey has the largest private sector in the region from Italy to China. It realizes 65 percent of Middle East and North Africa region's industrial exports. In the long term, the target is at 500 billion dollars for the year of 2023.¹⁴

Turkey's financial and banking system is one of the only European ones that has not been very badly affected by the global financial crisis. No Turkish bank faced a failure or recorded a loss in 2008. The Turkish banking and financial sector has been very stable and they recorded a net profit of 12 billion dollars by the end of 2008.¹⁵

Despite the turmoil in 2008, the Turkish tourism sector was praised as one of the biggest success stories. In 2008, the total number of tourists that visited Turkey, including Turks living abroad (roughly four million), was 31 million. Last year

¹¹ http://www.treasury.gov.tr/irj/portal/anonymous?guest_user=treasury

¹² <http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmweb/indexen.cfm>

¹³ http://www.treasury.gov.tr/irj/portal/anonymous?guest_user=treasury

¹⁴ <http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmweb/indexen.cfm> <http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmweb/indexen.cfm>

¹⁵ Egemen Bağış "A Win-Win relation: Turkey and EU" *Presentation at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government*, 24 September 2009. AA news entries on the subject, 25-26 September 2009.

Turkey ranked eighth in the world with its tourism revenues (and in terms of numbers of arrivals) of 22 billion dollars which was very instrumental in meeting Turkey's current account deficit. The government is sensitive about the sustainability of the sector and very much aware of the fact that this success story was possible only because of the country's western features such as democracy and secularism.

Energy security is an area of recent success:

Turkey, as the key transit country and hub for Europe's further energy diversification, hopes for the sources and routes of energy already playing an important role through projects like, the Nabucco pipeline, the BTC oil pipeline, the BTE gas pipeline, the Turkey-Greece-Italy gas interconnector and others. Further enhancement of the Southern corridor by inclusion of Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz Phase II, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Iraq would mostly benefit Europe.

The demographic value of Turkey:

European societies are undergoing a serious loss of labor force as a result of their aging populations. Many have exaggerated and exploited the fear that the Turkish people will flood the European labor market the day after their accession. The truth is, this scenario will never materialize – a decade long interim period will be implemented before the population is free to move across borders. Turkey has a dynamic young population with a median age of 28 which would make positive contributions to the labor markets and social welfare systems in European countries. Furthermore Turkey's population growth has slowed. As of 2009, the population of Turkey stood at 72 million with a growth rate of 1.3 percent per annum – down from 1.5 percent in 2005.¹⁶

Homeland security, fight against illegal immigration and organized crime:

Turkey is a barrier to illegal immigration to Europe. 60,000 people per year are arrested in Turkey for attempts to immigrate illegally to Europe. Given the magnitude of the problem, burden sharing and coordinated action towards third countries are a must. Turkey is a credible partner at the crossroads of different regions to combat organized crime, drug and human trafficking.

¹⁶ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3432.htm>; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>

Geographical and cultural limits of Europe:

As Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt (and term President of the EU) told the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, “If we judge Cyprus to be in Europe, although it is an island along Syria’s shores, it is hard not to consider that Turkey is in Europe.” Bildt was directly refuting Mr Sarkozy’s repeated statements that Turkey is not a European country and does not belong to Europe.¹⁷

In terms of cultural limits of Europe, one has to recognize the fact that the EU draws its strength from its immense socio-cultural diversity under the sense of common destiny, with its common values, policies and institutions. The EU’s greatest achievements of the last decades, from the “single market” to “enlargement”, have all been the results of embracing diversity and acting collectively and responsibly in an inclusive way.

Quite ironically, despite the arguments of the opponents of Turkish accession (the same mentality has actually opposed Orthodox Greeks’ accession too), Istanbul, Turkey’s economic and cultural capital is poised to become European Capital of Culture for the year 2010. Conceding the view of the European Parliament and approval by the Council of Cultural Ministers of the EU on 13 November 2006 Istanbul was announced to be the European Capital of Culture for 2010.¹⁸

Guarantee for the long term stability of Turkey and reform process:

The EU should also recognize the fact that once membership became a realistic possibility several years ago, a “silent revolution” came about in Turkey. Deep and effective reforms brought an end to decades-old taboos. The government amended nearly one-third of the Constitution and enacted nine reform packages. The EU accession process has acted as the main driving force in this area and primary agent for change.

¹⁷ <http://euobserver.com/9/28208>. *Le Figaro*, 25 May 2009; *Le Monde*, 28 May 2009.

¹⁸ <http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/SSS/index.htm>

Conclusions and Recommendations

Negative statements and actions by EU leaders have played a key role in discouraging Turkey. Popular support in Turkey for EU membership continues to wane. Approval of the idea of membership fell from over 70 percent in 2004 to 42 percent by the end of last year.¹⁹

For the first time in years, leading figures in the business establishment, which have always led the drive for European Union integration, are questioning the wisdom of continuing a negotiating process that appears to have no end. “We Turks are a proud nation and we don’t want to go to a house where we were invited (unanimous decision of 2005 to start the negotiations) but where the host keeps slamming the door in our face,” one prominent businessman explained to *The New York Times* recently.²⁰

Turkey, at least expects from the member states to honor the decision to continue accession talks; if nothing else, it is a matter of credibility for the Union (*pacta sunt servanda*).

Turkey’s recent activism in the Middle East, which is widely misread as a departure from the West is certainly encouraged by the frustrations with the EU. From this vantage point, it is healthier to interpret the dramatically deepened and broadened economic and energy relations between Turkey and Iran (and Russia) in recent weeks and months as Turkey’s way of saying “I am here, important and relevant for your policies more than you think!”

The Independent Commission on Turkey report says EU leaders should start by challenging popular prejudice, instead of feeding it. The skepticism over Turkey’s membership could be overcome if the pro-Turkey EU leaders become more vocal and re-embrace Turkey. As an example of how popular opinion can change, it is worth mentioning perceptions of France and Germany against each other after the Second World War. In 1954, 51 percent of French people told pollsters that they had a negative view of the German people and only 29 percent thought a Franco-German alliance would work.²¹ Now, both those countries are the locomotives of the EU, standing together.

¹⁹ Leo Cendrowicz, “Fifty Years On, Turkey Still Pines to Become European”, *Time*, 8 September 2009.

²⁰ Dan Bilefsky, “Tensions Between Turkey and the West Increase,” *The New York Times*, 28 October 2009.

²¹ Leo Cendrowicz, “Fifty Years On, Turkey Still Pines to Become European”, *Time*, 8 September 2009.

To change unfavorable public opinion, effective communication and public diplomacy strategy is needed both for the EU and Turkey.

Turkish membership is a strategic issue and requires leadership, vision and courage to counter short-termism and populism prevailing in some countries. Full membership should not be judged by today's data but by clear bright trends for tomorrow's Turkey. It should also be left to tomorrow's Europe and a decision that is to be made at the time of joining should not be pre-judged from today's short-sighted angle. When both the EU and Turkey are ready, Turkey will join the EU, not today. In any case, Turkey is a far bigger risk factor if left out of the EU than if it is let in.

However, time and patience are running out for those supporting Turkey's accession, as European leaders create one arbitrary obstacle after another. Turkish people now come to the point of belief that no matter what Turkey does to overcome the longstanding problem of Cyprus and other issues, the EU will create a new one for them. Without having a clear vision for the future it is getting politically and economically harder for Turkey to walk the long journey. "Let's talk turkey," people say to get down to baseline truths. Let's talk Turkey, yes – but also act soon.

The enlargement of the EU is not an easy process and has never been one. At the end of the day, as was the case for all previous enlargements, the decision will be a political one. This is a matter of EU's own vision for the future. If the EU is to become a global player in world politics, it needs Turkey.