

TURKEY-EU RELATIONSHIP: THE RATIONALE FOR A “THIRD WAY”

The Schuman Declaration of 1950 made one thing clear: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single, general plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which will create first a de facto solidarity.” Since then, the “European Project” has been expanding beyond its initial expectations. Still, Europe lacks a clear sense of identity and its borders have never been defined. When it comes to enlargement, which has been part of the European Project’s goals, no question is more challenging than that of Turkey’s accession to the EU. In this article, the two main points of view regarding Turkey’s accession are examined, and a “third way” is proposed as a more realistic path for Turkey-EU relations.

Francesco M. Bongiovanni*



* Dr. Francesco M. Bongiovanni is a Harvard-educated businessman who lived decades in the Arab world and Asia, was made a Knight of the Order of St Charles for his humanitarian and environmental protection endeavours. This article is based on his book titled *The Decline and Fall of Europe* (2012), and in particular on the chapter entitled “The Bosphorus Conundrum”.

T *he Ideology of European Integration*

The European Project may have some serious flaws, but one thing is undeniable: the central concept of integration has intertwined the EU member states in such a way that an armed conflict between them has become unthinkable. This achievement did not come easily. The European Project is the outcome of catastrophe, exhaustion, necessity, and vision after the end of World War Two. It was also the result of the French desire to contain Germany and of the American desire to contain the Soviet Union. Its implementation required courage and wisdom.

The Schuman Declaration –signed by France and Germany in 1950– made one thing clear: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single, general plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which will create first a *de facto* solidarity.”¹ There were neither plans nor blueprints; Europe was to be built gradually under a very long-term process. The process of cooperation was more important than the final aim of the cooperation itself. Former Korean President Roh Moon Hyun correctly captured the European Project’s essence by seeing Europe as a model for regional cooperation based on the rule of law and common values. Participating nations gave up important aspects of their sovereignty, in exchange for long term peace and prosperity. Europe became a peaceful continent and the world’s most significant economic power.

The European Project’s post-modern paradise became an irresistible magnet for neighboring states, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By early 2012, the European Union had absorbed 28 countries, with additional applicants waiting in the line. The lure of membership to this club of wealthy democracies has been too attractive for neighbors to resist and became a tremendous incentive for radical changes in these countries. Applicants have been required to transform themselves in full-fledged democracies, to improve their governance, and to put forward a package of reforms. The ex-Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn stressed that “enlargement is one of the EU’s most powerful policy tools: it exemplifies the essence of the EU’s “soft power”, or its transformative power, which has helped to transform countries to stable democracies and more prosperous societies, with higher levels of economic development and social welfare.”² American columnist Roger Cohen labeled the European Project as the most compelling and transformative process of the last half century.³

The Limits of Integration and Enlargement

When one looks EU’s geographical expansion in the last few decades, the European Project seems to have evolved into a universal ideology with nearly

¹ Robert Schuman, “Schuman Declaration”, May 1950.

² Olli Rehn, Speech given in November 2005 at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament, Strasbourg.

³ “Europe! Europe! Europe!”, *International Herald Tribune*, 7 October 2010.

global ambitions. Jean Monnet hoped that it would serve as an example of how to create a more prosperous and peaceful world. Recognizing the reality that expansion cannot go on forever but serves as a positive motivational force for candidate countries, Mark Leonard suggested that Europe should remain vague about where its borders will lie but very clear about the criteria that countries should meet in order to get in.⁴ Things are not always simple. For instance, Europe may be reluctant to accept the poor and troubled Balkans, especially in times of economic difficulties. However, accepting them might be the only way in order to put an end to their nationalistic tendencies and bring peace to Europe's South Eastern flank.

“Europe's borders have never been defined and its lack of a clear identity raises the question of where should these frontiers stop.”

The dilemma of European integration and enlargement has remained the same: a looser integration means less influence in world affairs and can lead to disunity; a stronger integration, on the other hand, means extra loss of sovereignty for member states. Europe's borders have never been defined and its lack of a clear identity raises the question of where should these frontiers stop. For instance, does the universalist philosophy inherent to the European Project preclude the definition of a “European heritage” (such as the notion of a “club of Christian nations”) which could set geographical limits to expansion? To the question of where Europe ends, Huntington responded “Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin”⁵, with the two being separated by a line running almost vertically from the North alongside Russia's border with Finland down to the middle of Romania and taking a turn West to leave out most of the Balkans (and Greece), where the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires touched. Will the very success of the European Project through its continuing expansion doom Europe's future by making the EU into a non-entity? If embracing peace and a democratic political system is basically a sufficient criterion to join Europe, then why not let in Azerbaijan, Armenia or Georgia at some point in the future?

Can the European Project be reversed? Europeans would be reckless if they will take it for granted. As more and more Europeans feel disillusioned by the Project's limitations, frustrated by some of its encroachments on their daily lives, as they get spoiled by welfare entitlements, as they feel that their jobs are threatened by several economic crises, it is possible the original ideals behind the European Project to be forgotten, anti-European political forces to take the upper hand and old rivalries to re-emerge. Economic crises usually lead to the creation of populist

⁴ Mark Leonard, *Why Europe will Run the 21st Century* (New York: Fourth Estate/Harper Collins, 2005).

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”, *The Free Press*, 2002, London, p. 158.

reflexes in nations and, since the majority of European economies is currently in a bad situation, one can expect liberalization achievements such as Schengen to be challenged. Europeans are likely to become even less European in the years ahead. Political life throughout Europe is going in reverse mode as one country after the other wonders if the Project has reached its limits or what it has really done for them. As a result, some member states have been trying to reclaim some of their lost sovereignty. The Eurozone crisis has exacerbated tensions. As the European Project has been losing its attraction to the European population enlargement fatigue has come to the forefront.

The Rejectionists Case

Rejecting applicants is nothing new for the EU. France vetoed United Kingdom's accession twice. Formal accession to the EU needs the unanimous vote of all member states, far from a certainty in the case of Turkey. When it comes to enlargement, Turkey is the biggest challenge and represents a conundrum. Given its complex and tormented history, the question of whether today's Turkey is European, Asian or something else is not easy for Europeans to answer. Turkey

"When it comes to enlargement, Turkey is the biggest challenge and represents a conundrum."

considers itself part of Europe, is a member of NATO and has applied to join the EU – in a sense the last big goal of Kemalization. Historically and geographically the country is between two worlds, a candidate to join Europe's "Christian club" but it was also the head of the 57-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference.

To many Europeans, asking what is so alarming about Turkey's accession is like asking what bothers you about letting a buffalo into your living room. First, it is the size: if Turkey was a few million-strong moderate Muslim country the situation would be different. Bosnia is Muslim and Macedonia has a significant Muslim minority, however their potential EU membership does not result in sleepless nights in European capitals. On the other hand, European rejectionists claim that a country of 70 million inhabitants (with a high birth rate in comparison to the rest of Europe), an historical foe of Europe –whose conversion to European ideals is only decades old and which has undergone a re-Islamization process– is another matter. Turkey is not only big but also relatively poor. According to Munich's Ost Europa Institute, if Turkey was about to join the EU it would automatically find itself

at the receiving end of European funds amounting to 14 billion euros per year – a costly undertaking, especially in tough economic times.

At the back of many European minds lurks the religious question: is Turkey Islam's ultimate Trojan horse? Will it attempt to Islamize Europe? Will it try to conquer from within what it did not succeed to do over the last few centuries from the outside? No matter how paranoid these worries might seem, the question is made all more acute by the convergence of several factors, including Western suspicion towards Islam since 9/11, the obvious re-Islamization of Turkey under Prime Minister Erdoğan and the realization that the number of Muslim immigrants in Europe is becoming significant and that their integration into European societies has not always been an easy task.

Ironically, Turkey's Islam is more moderate compared to the Islam existing in certain European countries, and the radicalization of Turkish immigrants in Western Europe should instead raise more concerns. The ultra-liberal UK has been far better at creating radical jihadists in recent times through its tight control on religious matters rather than Turkey. But how many Europeans would accept this argument? Erdoğan's credentials do nothing to calm the fears of Europeans rejecting accession because of religious fears. He was the product of religious Islamic schooling and even went to prison for reciting an Islamic poem during a public address with the line "The mosques are our barracks, the minarets our bayonets."⁶ Moreover, Erdoğan has recently been accused of leading a wave of political intolerance by jailing of journalists and opponents – a trend that disturbs European leaders.

For some Europeans, "Kemalization", the radical process by which Turkey transformed itself from a leading Islamic power to a modern secular state in the early 20th century, was nothing but a short period in Turkish history which is now being reversed. The real role for Turkey is to become what it always was: a leading Islamic power. Other arguments against Turkey's accession include the past and present treatment of political opposition and minorities.

The rejectionists do not mention though the fact that the vast majority of Turks today are moderate Muslims and that the AKP has never gained an overwhelming majority in elections or even that Ottoman Turkey tolerantly welcomed Jews who were expelled from Spain centuries ago.

Other rejectionists point out historical, ethnic and geographical arguments. They argue that Turks are not originally European: they come from Central Asia and that most of Turkey's land is located in Asia. For them, nothing in the geography, history or civilization of Turkey makes it European. If one includes in Europe a

⁶ "Erdoğan may know best on Turkey's path to EU", *The International Herald Tribune*, 19 May 2004.

country that is clearly non-European just because it adheres to the ideals and rules of the club, then where should the line be drawn? The process of enlargement would be endless and the EU's political cohesion would be further diminished. Rejectionists also point out "technical" difficulties like Turkey's refusal to recognize Cyprus, which is an EU-member state.

The Integrationists Case

Today the biggest supporter of Turkey's accession to the EU might not be Turkey itself, given its recent disappointment caused by Europe's ambivalence. If there is one country that would like to see Turkey joining the EU immediately is America. The U.S. pays lots of attention to geopolitical and security considerations and is not particularly concerned with the intra-European debate and Turkey's social impact in the EU.

"Despite Turkey's recent re-Islamization, Turks perceive accession to the EU as the natural and well-deserved result of their Westernization process that started many decades ago."

Turkey's 600,000-strong and well-equipped army, which is the largest in Europe, is already a member of NATO, guards its southern flank and keeps Russian access to the Mediterranean in check. Turkey can also be useful as a power in the Caucasus and could provide the U.S. more influence in the Black Sea. In the eyes of America's strategists, Turkey has always been an indispensable player in the region's geopolitical chessboard. Becoming part of the

EU would anchor Turkey to the U.S.-led NATO even more. Moreover, U.S. believe that by linking Turkey more firmly to Europe would create a stronger united front against radical Islam further south. On the contrary, allowing Turkey to drift away from Europe may lead Turkey itself to develop nostalgia for its past at the head of Islam and even to be tempted over time to join the camp of Islamist nations.

Turkey's accession to the EU also makes Machiavellian sense for the U.S.: it would result in the further dilution of the Franco-German axis which would lead to a more fragmented and politically weaker Europe, thus more easily controlled by Washington. Speaking at a NATO summit in Turkey in 2004, President George W. Bush was quite clear about where America stood on this issue: "I believe you ought to be given a date by the EU for your eventual acceptance into the EU."⁷

⁷ "Bush courts Turks and presses NATO", *The International Herald Tribune*, 28 June 2004.

Aligned with their American cousins, the British are in favor of Turkey's accession in order to weaken France and Germany and are not very concerned about arguments concerning Europe's ethnic and religious homogeneity; Scandinavians have the same policy. In countering the Americans' argument, former European Commission Member Frits Bolkestein commented, however, that "rejecting Turkey would not be to the liking of the Americans, but have they ever thought of letting Mexico join their union?"⁸

An alliance with Turkey would undeniably have positive strategic implications for Europe, especially to its soft power, independently of what form this alliance might take. Geographically, the country is a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Turkey's location, combined with its moderate brand of Islam, suggests that it can have a moderating influence within the Ummah. Turkey inside the EU would show the Ummah that the West is ready and willing to accept Muslims in its midst. Other integrationists argue that by not accepting Turkey Europe risks to alienate it and watch it developing closer ties to its South and East and evolving into a more radical Islamic state.

Despite Turkey's recent re-Islamization, Turks perceive accession to the EU as the natural and well-deserved result of their Westernization process that started many decades ago. Turkey joined the European Council in 1948 and NATO in 1952; it ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1954 and was recognized as a candidate for full membership in 1999, with formal negotiations opening in 2005. Turkey is also a member of the UEFA, where it has won prestigious European football trophies. Therefore, the Kemalist ideal is alive and Turks feel European at heart. Turks today are probably asking themselves whether their country will ever be able to join Europe or whether this is just an illusion. They still recall that one of the well-publicized messages from the disastrous referendum about the European Constitution in 2005 was that Europeans were not keen for Turkey's accession to the "Christian club" – an exaggerated notion, given that Pope John Paul's reference to Europe's Christian heritage was not included in the text of the European constitution in 2004. By now, Turks may well have grown disillusioned with this situation and would like to either get in through the main door like everybody else or not get in at all.

From a Turkish perspective:

Turkey is on a roll! We used to be called the "sick man of Europe", we may still be poor relative to the rest of Europe, but we are catching up real fast, posting the highest rates of growth in the OECD – we actually grew faster than China on an annual basis in the first quarter of 2011. There may be evidence of overheating in our economy and a growing addiction to FDI and imports, but we sailed through Europe's recent economic crisis like a breeze.

⁸ "Here's how to get started again", *The New York Times*, 15 June 2005.

Europe's population is old and its economy is falling asleep. The OECD says ours could become the second largest in Europe behind Germany by 2050! Our population is young, we could, just by ourselves, resolve Europe's upcoming demographic deficit problem.

Turkey's democratization process was significantly boosted by the ultimate goal of EU membership; do you want to risk reversing these gains by throwing the carrot away? We are a stable democracy, the first in the Muslim world. Our markets may still be a bit overregulated but we have, fundamentally, a free market economy with banks, deficits and debt levels healthier than most of Europe's. We are becoming a large market for goods, an important trading nation, a great low cost producer of many things which Europe needs.

Seriously, who needs whom most? Europe looks down on us? Well, the Middle East is looking up to us. Europeans wonder what Turkey really is. Well, we are starting to wonder what Europe really is. If they think our secular society is going to turn into some Iranian theocracy just because religion has made a bit of a comeback here and there, they are wrong. They don't seem to understand that there is a lively political debate going on in our country. If they don't understand or want us, let's look East and South: we can have a bright future there too. If we access Europe, we join the club and our Kemalist dream will have become true. If we don't, then let's forget about Europe and we could maybe regain our position at the helm of Islamic nations.

We may not all like our Prime Minister and his moves to muzzle the press and reinforce his own authority, but when he said "We are not a country that would wait at the EU door like a docile supplicant [...] Europe has no alternative to Turkey", he was speaking for all of us. In fact we are so fed-up with the whole thing that the course on the EU at Istanbul's Bahçeşehir University got cancelled for lack of interest from students!⁹ Turkey's Europe minister Egemen Bağış put it bluntly: "The EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs it."¹⁰

Confronting Reality

Arguments in favor or against Turkey's accession to the EU continue producing endless philosophical and political debates. These discussions may, at the end of the day, be pointless because of a simple consideration. Let us leave religion, social, economic and other issues aside for a moment and focus instead at the

⁹ "Issues of trust add to Turkey's apathy over EU membership", *The Financial Times*, 11 October 2011

¹⁰ "An uncertain path", *The Economist*, 15 October 2011.

power structure within Europe and the interests of the major players. The two stronger European powers, France and Germany, have, since the birth of the European Project, been calling the shots when they work together. It has been said that Germany needed France to hide its strength and France needed Germany to hide its weakness. Enlargement to 28 members has complicated things and diluted the power of the French-German axis, and the recent economic crisis may have dramatically shifted the power within this axis in Germany's favor. The road to Brussels, however, still passes through Paris and Berlin. If Turkey would be accepted, because of its sheer size, these two "big powers" of Europe would have a new, large and growing rival to contend within their own backyard and in fact one whose intentions and alignments are not totally clear. Suddenly the comfortable Franco-German *pas de deux* would turn into a much more complex three-player game where any player would constantly be afraid that the other two will join forces against it. It would also make the EU decision-making system –which is already problematic– even more complicated. Turkey is so large that if it joined the EU it would have 100 members in the European parliament, which means that Turkey could end up with more votes than Germany. The current balance of power within the EU would be entirely upset.

No wonder that the threshold for membership seems to be continuously rising. Can we realistically expect that France and Germany will risk losing their pre-eminence by accepting Turkey? It seems rather unlikely. No wonder that 75 percent of the French are opposed to Turkey's accession –former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing said in 2002 that Turkey's accession would mean the end of Europe¹¹– and

"Full accession may actually not serve Turkey's interests while a realistic and well-defined privileged partnership may find acceptance in Turkey."

Germany's popular opposition is not far behind. Traditional European balance of power politics makes Turkey's EU-membership unlikely for the foreseeable future.

The Third Way

A Europe in doubt has been doing what it excels at: prevaricate. However, like Siamese twins, Europe and Turkey are welded by geography and need each other. Aside from strategic-military considerations, Turkey is for Europe a 70 million people strong market with a fast growing economy at the same time when Europe's economies grind to a halt. It also represents a reservoir for cheap,

¹¹ "Is EU ready for Turkey? Muslim world is waiting", *International Herald Tribune*, 12 May 2004.

close-by manpower. Its economy needs everything. To Turkey, Europe represents a source of technology, modernization, investments and a large single market. Europe is, after all, responsible for over 40 percent of Turkey's foreign trade and three-quarters of its foreign investments. Why not build on this reality?

"Espousing the 'third way' does not mean to formally abandon full accession."

It has been suggested that Turkey should be given a special status or a "privileged partnership", instead of full accession. This idea, originally put forward by Giscard d'Estaing and subsequently revived by Sarkozy and Merkel, has unsurprisingly not found

many supporters in Turkey: abandoning the goal of full accession and settle for second-best seems to Turks like a slap in the face. What has recently been missing in the arguments of both sides is pragmatism: both sides react to the notion of "privileged partnership" as if they knew exactly what it entailed, however this term remains extremely vague since nobody has defined it.

Full accession may actually not serve Turkey's interests while a realistic and well-defined privileged partnership may find acceptance in Turkey. After all, it is unlikely that Turkey will want to give up certain aspects of its sovereignty that a full membership would entail.

The recent Libya episode and Turkey's new assertiveness in the Middle East show that Turkey does not automatically consider its foreign policy interests being aligned with those of Europe and/or NATO. Would Turkey, for example, want to become a member of the Eurozone? The answer is probably not.

However, there are plenty of issues where give-and-take can be beneficial for both sides. Turkey's intense frustration by the fact that it is the only EU candidate country whose citizens need to get visa in order to travel in the EU is matched only by Europe's frustration with illegal immigration transiting through Turkey. Mutual understanding on such issues would be beneficial to both parties and in this particular case would enhance Greece's chances to remain in Schengen. Europe's goal for Turkey's respect of its intellectual property requirements is another issue that could potentially lead to a win-win situation. There are things Turkey wants and does not want from the EU and vice versa, and these things automatically come with the full membership package, so why not look at the à la carte menu instead and focus on areas of common interests. Ukraine for instance recently joined Switzerland and Norway in the EU free-trade area without being a member state.

Should Turkey embark on this “third way” path, it may be able to extract numerous concessions from the EU, which would be happy not to have to make a yes-no decision about accession. The sign of relief would be heard from Brussels to Ankara. Espousing the “third way” does not mean to formally abandon full accession: the process does not need to be stopped, suspended or reversed, since this would entail a substantial loss of credibility for the EU which unanimously agreed on Turkey’s accession process in 1999 and 2004/5. The process can remain open but, just as the case of Taiwan’s potential reunification with China, no firm deadline needs to be set or sought by either party and the agenda does not need to be pushed. Both sides will gain by taking the spotlight away from the question of full accession.

The EU has been criticized for its democratic deficit and that is the product of elite politics rather than a grass-roots movement. In the case of Turkey’s relationship with the EU, it may be helpful to put the people in the driving seat, lay bare the debate on the table and make the two sides understand what the advantages of working even closer together are, without being constrained by having to define where the process formally needs to go, (which is in line with the incrementalist approach of the EU’s founding fathers). Europeans have everything to gain by learning more about Turkey and the opportunities that this country –which is expected by some economists to become the world’s 10th largest economy by 2050– might offer. The “third way” might, at the end of the day, offer a convenient solution to both sides, one that allows the parties to sidestep the politically delicate all-or-nothing accession issue and focus instead on pragmatic considerations. Since the “third way” can lead to a win-win situation for both sides, it needs to be taken more seriously into consideration while efforts should be made in order to define it. Let the debate begin.