

EU-TURKEY: A GOOD MATCH?

As the European Council in December 2004 nears, Vice-President of the European Parliament makes note of the progress Turkey has made while frankly pointing out the areas where Turkey still falls short of fulfilling the political criteria, emphasizing that Turkey is treated equally with the other candidate countries. Recognizing that the EU has an urgent need to strengthen its ability to influence the global and regional environment, Quadras notes that “the accession of a democratic, stable, highly populated country where a great majority of its people belongs to the Islamic faith would be a tremendously powerful message, confirming the ethical and political significance of the whole European project”. Stating clearly that the EU is built on the principle of unity and diversity, Quadras concludes by saying that as long as Turkey does her homework, 450 million fellow-Europeans will be waiting for her with their arms open.

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Turkey's reform process and its progress towards EU membership is an issue on which the people of Turkey are almost unanimous. This is quite an extraordinary situation given the wide political diversity in the country. It seems that from the ultra-left to the major entrepreneurs, indeed all the parliamentary parties and also the media, all support the objective of EU membership. This national consensus is undoubtedly a precious national asset. Such strong support will help Turkey very effectively to achieve its national goals.

The overwhelming pro-EU consensus in Turkey's contrasts with the situation inside the EU where major political parties oppose the very idea of Turkish EU membership and where even my own political family, the European People's Party is deeply split on this issue.

These contrasting situations place a particularly heavy responsibility on the leaders of Turkey, as they try to chart a way forward. As an example, in December 1999 the European Council in Helsinki declared Turkey a candidate state destined to join the Union. In December 2003 the European Council in Copenhagen made clear that the European Union would open accession negotiations without delay if the European Council in December 2004, on the basis of a report and a recommendation from the European Commission, decides that Turkey fulfils the political criteria. Even so, it seems that these major steps forward including last December's European Council decision have been received with considerable disappointment in Turkey. It seems that somehow certain elements in the nation's elites and in the media had led the people to expect a decision in 2002, which had been clearly scheduled for two years later - namely the decision on the opening of accession negotiations. Naturally people were then disappointed and the government moved quickly and wisely to put a positive interpretation on the Council's conclusions. There was no need in fact to submit Turkish citizens' emotions to such a feeling of being let down.

We in the European Parliament will study the next Commission Progress Report and update our institution's views early next year. May I add that we do not do so by ourselves in a closed circle. For the last 30 years the European Parliament and the Turkish Grand National Assembly have built up a very close working relationship. Our Joint Parliamentary Committee with Turkey has met 50 times. The President of the TGNA regularly meets with our President and the Presidents of the Parliaments of the other candidate countries. Our political groups have formed relations with political parties here in Turkey. So we know each other well and so we can speak to each other as friends. After enlargement we will have many new members and this practice of friendly and fruitful cooperation will have to be deepened.

So please let me make one thing very clear: we understand and support Turkey's ambition to achieve full membership of the EU. The road to full membership will not be quick or easy but precisely because Turkey could contribute so much to the Union, I hope the country will show the sense of national unity, patience and perseverance, which will be required. In view of the urgent need to strengthen the EU's ability to influence its global and regional environment, the accession of a democratic, stable, highly populated country where a great majority of its people belongs to the Islamic faith would be a tremendously powerful message, confirming the ethical and political significance of the whole European project.

This I think goes some way to answering one question: 'EU-Turkey: a good match?' My answer is, without hesitation, yes. The EU itself is built on the principle of unity and diversity. The draft Constitution presented by the Convention on the Future of Europe makes this very point. The participation of the Turkish Government and Parliament representatives confirmed,

that Turkey is already part of the European unification project, well before becoming a full member of the EU.

The fact that the EU and Turkey do make a good match is also confirmed by the complex but clearly apparent linkage between Turkey's domestic reform and preparations for EU accession. The current process of accession which will bring 10 new countries into the EU next May was made conditional on their complete democratization and the resolution of all potential disputes with their national minorities or with neighboring countries. In eight of the cases their domestic reform process represents the achievement of the goals of their national revolutions in 1989. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR created the conditions for them to achieve their rightful place as members of the Union, but they also had to meet their commitments, change their laws, transform their economies and convince us, the European Parliament and also all our National Parliaments, that they shared our values and objectives. They also felt sometimes that the process was too slow and, moreover, particular sections of their societies raised many questions about the social and economic price of membership. By applying the principle of conditionality to EU membership, the Union did, however, play a very substantial role in achieving profound, irreversible improvements in these countries. As I see it, a similar positive spiral is building up in Turkey because our conditions are again very similar to Turkey's objectives. So yes, indeed, the EU and Turkey are a good match.

Accession is not, however, a marriage between two equal partners. Let's look at things as they really are, not try and pretend to each other and to our citizens that things are otherwise. Joining the European Union will mean Turkey's joining a political union with 27 member states, 450 million people, the world largest trading bloc and moreover a constitutional, legal and economic structure which will have been developed over more 50 years. When Turkey meets the conditions and opens the negotiations it will participate in what is formally described as an intergovernmental accession conference composed of 27 EU member states and Turkey. To point this out as a cold reality is just to make the point that all countries applying to join the EU have had to go through the same experience of Britain in the 1970's or Spain in the 1980's, proud old nation-states having to accept the reality of applicant status.

While I am obliged to make this point, let me deal with one other misunderstanding that sometimes circulates amongst opinion formers in this country- namely that Turkey is being treated differently from other candidate countries, according to other criteria. This is just not true. Turkey has undertaken a series of political and constitutional reforms with the precise aim of meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Completing these reforms and making sure they are properly implemented in practice is Turkey's responsibility. Let me quote a neutral observer but a good friend of Turkey, Mr. Stuart EINZENSTADT, the former US Ambassador to the EU in Brussels. Last week, in the Financial Times, he wrote an article emphasizing that Turkey has much to contribute as an EU member, but added that 'skeptics are right in saying Turkey still has a long way to go before it is ready to join. Its record was sharply criticized in the U.S. State Department's latest annual Human Rights report. Its relations with Greece remain tense, particularly over Cyprus. These issues must be resolved. He also expressed the view that perhaps accession negotiations could still be opened even before Turkey fully meets all the Copenhagen criteria. That is a possibility which may have to be considered in the course of the next year.

Turkey must be ready as a candidate for membership to participate in the demanding reality of the accession negotiations and to convince the EU that when it joins, it will be able to do so having met all the criteria for membership.

The massive efforts now being made by the Turkish Government and the Grand National Assembly show that this is exactly what Turkey aims to achieve. The Turkish Government's determination to proceed with the reform process came as a surprise to some of my colleagues in the European Parliament who were expecting, perhaps even quietly hoping, that the today ruling Party, the AKP, would lead Turkey onto a different path. Our President Pat Cox, invited Mr. Erdogan to Strasbourg within days of his election last autumn and Turkey's Prime Minister convinced us that this was the opposite of his plans. Indeed, many of us have been impressed at how the AKP has, in fact, used the prospect of EU membership and the associated reform process, to eradicate these doubts and to firmly establish the party's European credentials. The actions of the Government, its role in Iraq, its efforts to foster a solution to the Cyprus problem and to transform relations with Greece, have confirmed the legitimacy of Turkey's professed commitment to Western democratic values. The AKP's desire created an environment that is highly conducive to advancing the reform process and preparing for EU accession.

The record of recent months is indeed impressive. Four comprehensive sets of democratic reforms have entered into force in the year 2003, aiming to improve the most criticized aspects of Turkish democracy, such as limits to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association and lack of respect to human dignity, along with the strong influence of the military on domestic politics. With the two democratization packages that entered into force in January 2003, the Law on Political Parties has been amended to introduce new measures that make it more difficult to close down political parties. Restrictions on the political party membership of persons brought to trial on the basis of their political ideas have been lifted and penalties for packages also expanded the freedom of the press, eased the procedures for setting up associations and abolished the restrictions applying to the acquisition of property by religious foundations. Retrials of cases on the basis of the decisions taken by the European Court of Human Rights were also made possible, paving the way for the retrial of some former Kurdish leaders such as Leyla Zana.

The sixth reform package that entered into force in mid-July has become widely known for lifting Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law that defined propaganda against the indivisible integrity of the state as a criminal activity. The lifting of this Article together with the expansion of broadcasting in Kurdish to public as well as private radio and TV channels have been crucial in signifying the shift in the attitude of the Turkish state in favor of tolerance and further democracy. The lack of any significant acts of terrorism and the prevailing prospect of EU membership are part of this positive process.

It is indeed the last set of democratic reforms, which entered into force at the end of July, that has probably attracted the most attention, not because of the additional measures it has introduced to strengthen the fight against torture and the exercise of fundamental freedoms, but due to its emphasis on strengthening the civilian control of the military. The package has marked the end of the centralized role of the General Secretariat of the National Security Council (NSC) as the implementing body of NSC decisions and as the coordinating institution between various ministries in policy-making. These functions have now been transferred to the Prime Minister who, as you know, is also given the right to appoint the General Secretaries of the NSC.

The new amendments require that civilians can also be appointed to that post. With these most recent reforms, military spending has also been placed under civilian control and the role

of the NSC has been redefined in a more restricted sense, turning it into an advisory institution rather than a centralized decision-making body. All those recent reforms that aim to curb the excessive power of the military in Turkish politics serve to overcome an established legacy that derived from conditions nowadays superseded. Just like all the other reforms that have been passed, these also signal a shift in Turkish domestic politics and a response to European expectations.

In terms of legislation, Turkey has indeed come a long way, undertaking certain reforms that far exceed what an observer would have thought imaginable ten years ago. Prior to the last Copenhagen Summit, significant legislation has been passed, expanding freedom of opinion and expression and relaxing the legal restrictions on teaching and broadcasting in local languages, namely Kurdish.

This is all progress but it is not yet enough.

The issue of implementation remains unsatisfactory. Following the summit at Copenhagen, the government had stated on various occasions that its primary focus in the year 2003 would be on legislative reforms, in order to allow time for effective implementation in 2004. Positive signs of implementation are emerging. Some of the legal changes such as the increase in the number of civilian members of the NSC, can be easily implemented. The most problematic cases however are expected to occur with respect to the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms. In that respect, Human Rights Boards have been established in cities and provinces, recording human rights abuses and responding to relevant complaints. A special board is also being set up composed of representatives of the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior Affairs, General Secretariat for EU Affairs, the Human Rights Office of the Prime Minister and the Presidency of Human Rights Advisory Boards. This board will be responsible for monitoring all work on implementation and will be able to take action in cases of non-compliance with the legislative measures.

The speed of the reform process naturally means that the full effects of the new laws will take time to be felt in police stations, court rooms, prisons, schools and indeed society as a whole.

There is one particular example of the potential shortcomings of the implementation of reforms undertaken which I feel, as Vice-President of the European Parliament, absolutely obliged to mention. This is the re-trial of Leyla Zana and others. Observers from the European Parliament and many NGOs have been attending the re-trial and it has been widely reported in our institutions and our media that the procedure is in the process of becoming a farce. It may well be that in Turkey, as it happens in all member-states of the European Union, the Government and Parliament have no right to oblige the judiciary to act in a certain way, but all I can say is that the decision of the State Security Court to refuse the detainees a provisional release (after over a decade in jail) is something we just cannot accept. The legal proceedings are dragging on and if the outcome is another conviction after another flawed trial, this will be a failure to genuinely respect Turkey's commitment under the European Convention of Human Rights and an excellent argument for those seeking to delay the opening of accession negotiations.

Similarly one other thorny issue, let's be under no illusions. If there is no solution to the Cyprus problem before that country joins the Union in 7 months time, it will be another terrible missed opportunity which will damage the interests of all Cypriots and undermine

Turkey's chances of accession. All 25 Member States have to agree to the opening of the negotiations. I do not think I need to labor this point.

Enlargement and the unification of our continent will amount to our generation's contribution to world peace. This process will also strengthen the Union's political status and Turkey does and will contribute a great deal. The development, within NATO, of a common foreign and security policy and in due course a common defense is under way. The EU is undertaking three operations at the moment, in Bosnia, Macedonia and the Congo. We in the European Parliament are also strongly supporting the Convention's proposal for institutional reform to facilitate the process of creating greater institutional continuity in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy. The creation of the new office of European Foreign Minister is long overdue. Through Turkey's accession the EU will be in a position to contribute much more effectively to fostering peace and democracy in neighboring countries.

We all know that there is no clash of civilizations under way but as Europeans we have to do much more together to reverse some of the current trends in world affairs. The absurd and offensive remarks made recently by the Prime Minister of Malaysia about the Jews require more than the denunciation they have rightly received. As a friend and neighbor of Israel Turkey has proved that an Islamic country does not have to be an enemy of that country or of the West. Turkey's successful transition and accession to the EU will, therefore, offer an alternative to the politics of hatred and division advanced, quite wrongly, in the name of Islam.

Similarly we must resist these in our own societies, on our own extremist fringe, into seek play on xenophobia. When one reads the words of an American General calling from the pulpit of a church to fight terrorism in the name of Jesus, it is clear that there is no room for complacency.

I would like to conclude by quoting from my own institution's latest resolution on Turkey adopted by a clear majority earlier this year in which the European Parliament '*recognizes that the political values of the European Union are chiefly based on the Judaeo-Christian and humanist culture of Europe, but that no-one has a monopoly on these universal values of democracy, the rule of law, human and minority rights and freedoms of religion and conscience- values which can perfectly well be accepted and defended by a country where the majority of the population is Muslim; believes, therefore, that there are no objections of principle to Turkey's EU membership.*'

The destiny of Turkey is in its own hands. We cannot force Turkey along a path it does not wish to follow, but I am sure that as so many free Europeans in these last 50 years, the Turkish people will be ready to play their part in building a new and wider Europe, a Europe we can all be proud of. As the founder of modern Turkey, President Kemal Atatürk once said, ' We must liberate our concepts of justice, our laws and our legal institutions from the bonds which hold a tight grip on us although they are incompatible with the needs of our century.' These words were pronounced eighty years ago but the vision they reveal is fully in force for the Turkey of today. In conclusion, my suggestion to Turkey is to do your homework, do it well, do it complete and do it in time, because at the end of the accession road 450 million of fellow-Europeans, citizens of the European Union will be waiting for you with open arms.