

"TURKEY AND THE CAUCASUS AT THE EDGE OF EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT"

Turkey's pursuit of the EU membership and the process of the Caucasus' integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures are parallel, though unrelated tracks. Yet Europe, whose presence in the strategically important Caucasus region is still less than adequate, could only benefit by enlisting Turkey as its member and arm in the Caucasus. Ankara, too, should build up on its successful partnership with the pro-Western Azerbaijan and Georgia and see it as a benefit for its EU membership rather than separate the two directions of Turkey's foreign policy.

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Once a small economic community with six members, the European Union is soon to become the world's largest regional economic and political institution. In May 2004, the Union will embrace ten new members from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), thus enacting the greatest enlargement in its history. New members are expected to complete their pre-accession homework by May 1st, 2004. Next round of talks will be held with Romania and Bulgaria with possible membership in 2007. Turkey is yet to obtain a date for accession talks at the end of 2004.

This most ambitious ever enlargement project ever will increase current EU population from 375 million to 450 million with an additional 30 million expected from Bulgaria and Romania. New members are expected to adopt common policies within EU in foreign affairs and defense as well as to integrate their economic markets. By the end of 2010, the EURO will be a single currency in 25 member states, thus making the EU a unified economic market. The size of EU and its potential economic weight will make the Union the world's largest single economy and perhaps one of the strongest political players in the international arena. The EU members' common objective is to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010".¹

The EU enlargement has been developing along side with expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which since the collapse of the Soviet Union has undergone an extensive transformation. The Alliance has accepted new members from the former Soviet Bloc and has redefined its mission and future goals. Several CEE countries have already joined the alliance and seven more – Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – are expected to join by June 2004.

With NATO's enlargement eastward, the mission and strategic interests are shifting as well. Today, NATO acts as a guarantor for the political and economic security of its new members and prevents current and potential threats to the western interests in these regions. The emerging oil and gas crossroads at the Caspian Basin and unstable environment in the Middle East make these regions one of the top priorities of the newly revised NATO security framework.

By joining the EU and NATO, new members anticipate to promote democracy in their states, secure their independence, as well as to strengthen their economies, political environment and human rights records. Most importantly, both bodies are seen as a guarantee for the security and stability of European establishment.

EU and Turkey

While the membership of ten CEE states in 2004 and an additional two in 2007 is almost certain, the accession of Turkey into the EU remains unclear. Turkey, the oldest candidate for membership, is the only country whose membership has been debated intensively over the last twenty years and yet has not been finalized. Turkey is a

¹ Report of Wim Kok to the European Commission, 'Enlarging the European Union: Achievements and Challenges', European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (March 2003)

democratic and secular state, and also the only Muslim country in NATO. Its geostrategic location at the crossroads of East and West and closeness to regions like the Middle East, the Caucasus and Russia have played a significant role in defining security objectives of the EU and the West.

Despite several set backs in its democratic process, Turkey has tried hard to modernize and westernize its political and economic structure in order to bring it to the level of EU member states. Since the formal recognition of Turkey as a candidate state at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, the pre-accession process for Turkey's membership has been intensified. As a result of the decisions at the Helsinki summit in 2001, the EU Commission adapted a program called an Accession Partnership for Turkey. Soon, Turkey followed the initiative by announcing its domestic program, "National Program for the Adoption of the EU *acquis*".²

Since 2001, Turkey has passed seven reform packages meant to fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria, which are the preconditions for all EU candidates. Most of these reforms dealt with legislative and administrative measures, human rights and economy. Although the EU Commission has found the reforms encouraging and impressive, in overall evaluation it states that reforms have fell short of the EU standards, especially in the area of implementation. The recent report on Turkey's progress towards accession concluded that "implementation of the reforms is uneven...[and] the short term priorities in relation to most chapters of the *acquis* have not yet been addressed in a significant way".³ Thus, Turkey is yet to implement recent reforms on the ground.

An uncertainty on the side of the EU with regard to a firm timetable for Turkish accession, is the main factor for skepticism of many Turks. Some Turks believe that no matter how much progress their country makes to satisfy the EU accession criteria, Europeans will still put further obstacles to reject its membership on the bases of subjective arguments. One of such arguments is believed to be the Cyprus issue, which Turkey has to solve by the time the island becomes a full member of the club. The solution of the Cyprus issue before May 2004 will definitely make Turkey's membership plea irresistible. Therefore, the end of 2004, when the EU members will decide on Turkey's fate, will be a crucial point in future development of Turkish foreign policy.

EU and The Caucasus

Unlike with Turkey, the cooperation of the EU with the South Caucasus states are based on bilateral relations and limited to the activities of the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organizations for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) and regional TACIS programs under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA). Georgia was the first to become a member of the Council of Europe in 1999, and was followed by Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2001. CoE has been engaged in building and strengthening democratic institutions in all three states, providing financial and technical assistance.

² "Turkey-EU Relations, Post-Helsinki Phase", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey web site, available online at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ad/adc/default.htm>

³ The European Commission Regular Report on Turkey (2003). Available online at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/index.htm

The emphasis has been placed on developing the countries' infrastructure, enhancing human rights, stimulating regional cooperation and integration, reducing corruption and encouraging the settlement of ethnic conflicts.⁴

With the EU's eastwards enlargement, the South Caucasus will become one of the most strategically important locations with respect to the EU's security. Taking into account several ethnic conflicts in the region, stability and peace in the Caucasus will become a priority for the EU in the long term. Moreover, the Caucasus in general, and Azerbaijan in particular, is considered as a crucial transit corridor for European producers and exporters seeking to access markets in Central Asia. Also the oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea render the region valuable for the European countries, whose need for energy is growing dramatically.⁵ The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline are the two ongoing projects that will carry the oil and gas of the region to the European markets.

It is important to note that unlike Turkey, the states of the Caucasus fell under a category of post-Soviet states, which makes their membership process develop independently from that of Turkish membership. Therefore, the EU's presence in the Caucasus and Turkey's membership in the Union are at the moment following more or less unrelated tracks. Though both Azerbaijan and Georgia have repeatedly stated their support for Turkey's membership in the EU, their own relations with Brussels have been developing separately from that of Ankara.

Although in her recent interview to "Die Welt" the Speaker of Georgian Parliament, Nino Burdzhaneladze, declared that her country's objective is to become a member of the EU in ten years⁶, it is too soon to foresee this. Indeed, the EU membership will be a great achievement for the South Caucasus states, however, this topic has not been on agenda of politicians or the populations yet. Nor it is being discussed amongst the members of the EU. Nonetheless, cooperation between the EU and the South Caucasus states is increasing and is likely to expand in the near future. Turkey's accession to the EU will definitely play the greatest role in shaping the EU's strategy towards the region and the way in which future development takes place.

Analysis

With the first phase of EU enlargement on its way, Turkey's membership to the Union is still ambiguous. Since the Helsinki summit in 1999 there has been a significant change on the question of Turkey's membership. Both sides have taken important steps in melting

⁴ Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCAs), The Tacis Programme Annual Report on the South Caucasus States can be downloaded on http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/pca/index.htm

⁵ The Tacis Programme Annual Report on Azerbaijan (1999), Commission of the European Communities, Brussels (2000). Also see The Tacis Programme Annual Reports on Georgia and Armenia. Available online at http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/rsp/progs.htm

⁶ "БОРЬБА США И РОССИИ В ГРУЗИИ ПРИОБРЕТАЕТ ВСЕ БОЛЕЕ ЯСНЫЕ ОЧЕРТАНИЯ", Zerkalo, November 30, 2003

down differences and reaching some flexibility in the accession process. Although in the mid 1990s, the negotiations seemed to have reached an impasse, today the situation is much more optimistic, though there is a long way ahead.

Whether Turkey is accepted to the EU or not, changes during the pre-accession process in Turkey will have a great impact on the future geopolitical situation in the region. The process is likely to have a great impact on neighboring states in the Caucasus whose successful integration to the West is linked to a presence of a strong and powerful Turkey.

Turkey and Accession to the EU

Even if Turkey gets a date for accession talks at the end of 2004, it is unlikely that it can join the Union as a member before 2010. There are several reasons for this outcome.

First of all, it is the size of the EU and its economy. To achieve the goal of a unified economic market, the EURO will become a single currency in all member states by the year of 2010. It is hard to predict how well the process of integration will proceed and how fast the Union can reach its goal of becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”. Nonetheless, it is clear that within six years it will be impossible for the EU to integrate a country of 70 million that has yet to strengthen its economy and to solve its domestic political issues. Therefore, economically it is not feasible for the EU to accept Turkey during next six or seven years.

Secondly, there is little doubt that members like France and Germany have greater influence in the Union compare to other members. Although weak economically, Turkey is a regional power that may want to play a bigger role in a decision making process as a full-fledged member. This, however, may be an irritant for current club leaders, who would rather accept a pacified Turkey instead of a strong and influential one. Thus, the accession of Turkey to the Union may also be opposed – and not necessarily officially – by countries like France and Germany.

Thirdly, despite the fact that one can hardly distinguish a difference between the streets of Paris and Istanbul, Turkey is home of more than 60 million Muslims that do not necessarily share the same cultural background with the “Europeans,” as they are traditionally perceived. It is important to note that unlike CEE countries, which turn to Europe mainly because of security considerations, Turks’ motivation to become a member of the EU generally comes from economic reasons. The majority of Turks believe that membership will bring them welfare and prosperity. Although, regardless of its economic situation, Turkey is likely to still continue further integration with the EU, there is a great chance that the level of insistence on becoming an EU member at any cost might decline, should Turkey succeed to strengthen its economy and welfare of its citizens.

Moreover, the EU should first decide whether it will be a “Christian Club” or a diverse union with Turkey as a member. As an author of Business Week puts it “ Europe’s enlargement plan is ... [a] kind of political bet. At stake is whether Europe becomes a

diverse, competitive, high-growth region or a much broader social welfare state with new petitioners banging on Brussels' door may not be known for years".⁷

NATO Enlargement

Indeed, as a NATO country Turkey's accession to the EU will provide an opening door for the States of the South Caucasus to become new candidates for membership. However, the relations between the states of the South Caucasus and the EU do not necessarily depend on Turkish membership and develop independently from Turkey-EU relations. Thus, Turkey has a far greater role to play within the NATO enlargement process than the EU enlargement. It is also true since uncertainty in Turkey's accession suggests membership is not imminent.

The process of integration of the Caucasus to the West is likely to develop in two major ways. First is through the membership to NATO. The Alliance has far less pre-accession conditions compared to the EU, which makes it more attractive to newly independent states in the Caucasus. It also has a security and defense mechanism under which these small states will find protection and guarantee their fragile sovereignty. Second is through regional energy projects such as the "East-West Energy Corridor" project.

As a part of the East-West Energy Corridor project, since 1991, Azerbaijan has taken significant steps in inviting foreign investors and in securing its oil and gas reserves. Azerbaijan and Georgia, along with Turkey have successfully brokered the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which will carry Caspian oil and gas to the Western markets. As a result of these projects, both Azerbaijan and Georgia hope to reduce the Russian influence over their domestic policies and achieve flexibility in their foreign policy decisions.

The main vehicle of cooperation and integration between NATO and countries of the former Soviet bloc is through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Although all three states in the Caucasus are members of PfP there are significant disagreements on the issue of NATO expansion among the three states of the Caucasus. While Georgia and Azerbaijan are very supportive of the initiative, Armenia strongly opposes it primarily due to Armenia's alliance with Russia. The Russian factor will be crucial in Armenia's membership to Alliance, which is unlikely under current circumstances.

Also there are several frozen conflicts in the region that need to be resolved before the membership talks begin. The Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) in Azerbaijan have been major obstacles to regional integration and cooperation between the three states. The conflicts had devastating effects on the social and economic situation of the entire region. Azerbaijan is the one who has suffered the most. Almost 20% of its territories are occupied by Armenia and it has nearly a million refugees and internally displaced persons. The work of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk group has not yet brought about any concrete results. The status quo is preserved, as well as the high political risk for the development projects in the region.

⁷ Dowling, Bob, Business Week, Issue 3809, p70, 1p, 1c

The EU, the US and Turkey are very interested in the settlement of these conflicts, which stand on the road of stability and development in the region. While Turkey has blooming relations with both Georgia and Azerbaijan, the relations with Armenia are strained due to Armenia's Russian-backed policy of aggression in the region. Turkey does not have any diplomatic relations with Armenia and the Turkish-Armenian border remains closed. Armenia has chosen an uncompromising stand with regard to the NK conflict and has been voicing both direct and indirect territorial claims against Turkey, thus making the cooperation between Armenia and Turkey or Azerbaijan unattainable. Although it is Armenia, which occupies internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan, ironically it is Turkey whom both the EU and the US are pressuring to compromise on border and other issues.

Despite all negative developments in the Caucasus, an integration process of Georgia and Azerbaijan to the Western markets will advance rapidly as the completion of ongoing oil and gas pipeline approaches. The official invitation for Georgia and Azerbaijan to join NATO may come after Ukraine's membership, which is likely to take place before 2007. However, the deployment of American troops to the region may occur before that time.

A recent visit by the US Defense Secretary Ronald Rumsfeld to Georgia and Azerbaijan shows once again that Washington is very interested in furthering military relations with both states. Particularly, Azerbaijan is seen as a potential country where some of the US Air Forces based in Germany could be relocated.

The US factor

It is not a secret that the US is a strong supporter of Turkey's membership to the EU. The US has helped Turkey lobby the EU members in several occasions in the past and has stated its willingness to see a secular and democratic Turkey amongst other European countries. However, the US has also had an alternative plan in the case that the EU continues to reject Turkish membership.

One of the five pillars of the US policy towards the Caspian region during the Clinton administration defines American interest as "promoting the western orientation of newly independent countries and creating a regional framework of cooperation with Turkey".⁸ By ensuring an American presence in the region and creating a framework of cooperation between Turkey, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the US offers greater regional influence for Turkey. In fact, the United States lays a foundation for a possible Central Asia-Caucasus regional integration model that Turkey might use as an alternative to the EU. But whether Turkey is willing to or able to use this opportunity remains questionable.

Turkey's Role in the Caucasus

⁸ Jofi Joseph, 'Pipeline Diplomacy: The Clinton Administration's Fight for Baku Ceyhan', WWS Case Study (New Jersey: Princeton University 1999)

As far as the Turkish foreign policy is concerned, the Caucasus is considered to be an area of a high priority for Turkey's own security and stability. Turkey views the region as "a natural link to the Central Asian countries" with people of which it has historical, social and cultural ties.⁹ Turkey has close military ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan and has actively supported initiatives of the Euro-Atlantic institutions such as OSCE, NATO and the Council of Europe, and regional organizations like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.¹⁰

In reality, however, Turkish influence is limited to several economic enterprises, moderate military cooperation and "Turkish Schools" run by non-governmental organizations. Turkey's obsession with the EU has left the Turkish foreign policy makers undecided about what its foreign policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia should be. While other two regional powers, Russia and Iran, have constantly sought a greater role in the Caucasus, Turkey's equivocal approach led to a decline of its influence. A neighboring Iran, where each development in the Caspian basin is closely watched and analyzed, has a far better defined strategy towards the region than Turkey.

When in July 2001 an Iranian gunboat chased away two Azerbaijani survey ships exploring a new oil field in the Southern Caspian, a diplomatic crisis took place. Azerbaijan expected a strong message from Turkey supporting its position and condemning Iranian action. However, Turkish government officials were contented with a delicate "note" that called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. It was not until the then Turkish Chief of General Staff, General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, who responded to a plea and came to visit Azerbaijan with the squadron of fighter jets, which faded the tension away. Moreover, Turkish standstill in the recent Georgian crisis revealed one more time a lack of strategy towards the Caucasus, which former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel described as saying "Turkey is lost in the Caucasus".¹¹

Conclusion

Turkey's EU membership and a strong influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia are not mutually exclusive phenomena. Quite the opposite, the EU and NATO enlargement work directly to the interest of Turkey in the region. If Turkey is to become an influential and powerful player in the Caucasus, it must reevaluate its foreign policy considering recent geopolitical changes and strengthen its position in the region using the US influence and NATO enlargement. At the same time it has to develop more friendly relations with the Russian Federation. This would help to reconcile different loose ends of Ankara's foreign policy, which at times seems erratic.

A success of Turkish foreign policy in the Caucasus will depend on three main factors. Firstly, how soon the 'frozen' ethnic conflicts in the region are resolved and how well an integration process between the three Caucasus states and Turkey go? Secondly, how will

⁹ 'Turkey's Relations With The Southern Caspasia States', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey website, available online at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ae/caucasian.htm>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Turkish Daily News, 'Turkish standstill in Georgian crisis seen revealing lack of strategy', November 29, 2003

Turkey adjust itself to changes in the US strategy in the region in general and the US-Russian relations in particular? What type of policies towards Russia will Turkey develop on its own? Thirdly, how will the democratization process inside Turkey develop and how strong will Turkey become economically?

The EU hype, so pronounced in CEE and Turkey may ring hollow in the Caucasus. After all, a U.S. analyst Vladimir Socor quite accurately described EU's policy towards the South Caucasus as "benign neglect."¹² For in spite of all the statements of visiting European officials, the Western influence in the region is firmly associated with the United States. Although, the EU has been a major donor of technical assistance and humanitarian aid to the South Caucasus, it is yet to become politically relevant in the lives of the people there. So far, France, the only EU member co-chairing the OSCE Minsk Group mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been the least active lagging far behind US and Russia, the promising TRACECA-Silk Road project has been receiving less than adequate attention from Brussels, it is Washington, where the independently-minded Baku and Tbilisi turn for security guarantees (Yerevan, by contrast, still prefers the old-time Moscow connection).

Not surprisingly, thus, asked to drive to "Embassy," a typical Baku cab driver would drive to the American compound. Perhaps, a more active Turkey with an EU membership card would certainly be a valuable asset for the Union in the nearby regions, from where Brussels still seems far away.

¹² VLADIMIR SOCOR, "A Tale of the Two Post-Soviet Countries," The Wall Street Journal Europe, December 19, 2003