

BEYOND COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS: EDUCATING YOUTH ON TURKEY'S EU ACCESSION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Turkish accession to the European Union is a hotly contested issue among Europeans; opinion polls indicate mainly negative views. The issue is largely one of identity politics, intertwined with conflicting views on the very nature of Europe's own character and identity. Historical experiences play a role in the perception of Turkey's compatibility with the EU. Greece is a particularly relevant case in this sense. It is especially important that NGOs play a role in creating a "common ground" between Turks and Greeks by highlighting values and promoting understanding. Educating youth would need to be an important component of this framework.

George L. Georgoudis*



* George L. Georgoudis has recently received his MA in European Studies from Kings College, London with a research focus in South – East European affairs. He has been an intern in the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE). www.cdsee.org

As these lines are written, in an office very near Thessaloniki's old town, the predominantly Muslim quarter of the city prior to the 1920s, a cup of Greek (or Turkish?) coffee on the side, the music of Stereo Total is coming through the speakers. This being a journal on foreign policy, the reader is not expected to be familiar with alternative rock except that Stereo Total is the side effect of a major shift in European politics. The band is a joint project of German and French musicians. As the lyrics are almost evenly divided into French and German, one can only wonder if the same band could have existed if the European Union had not come into being. Indeed the fruits of more than fifty years of Franco-German cooperation, after many years of rivalry and war, are not just political but touch even on the very central element of youth culture: pop music.

Putting the Greek/Turkish relationship under the prism of eventual Turkish accession would lead to going beyond the standard debate about political benefits and economic gains, and devoting more time to the transformation of national ideologies that would take place as a result of Turkish membership. When the clearly demarcated lines of separation and borders become blurred, as will be the case when Turkey joins the EU, the perception of the "other" for both Greeks and Turks will change. More should be done to facilitate the understanding of the "other" (in this case, of the Greeks and Turks), particularly among the younger generations. Civil society can play a very proactive and important role in reaching young people.

Turkey and the Debate About the Future of the EU

The policy elite and political leaders often consider EU issues as off-limits to public scrutiny. EU bureaucracy and the very nature of European Union policy making, with the structure of the Commission and the European parliament largely too complicated for the general public to understand, make Brussels seem distant and mostly detached from the problems of the everyday European. For years major decisions over the future of the European Union such as regarding enlargement or closer integration were met with a very clear yawn by the average citizen. However recent developments such as the rejection of the constitutional referendum in a number of EU members indicate that public opinion plays an important role in the future of the EU. In fact, with the referenda, it appeared that the public not only wants to become involved but seems to be in disagreement with many of the core concepts that EU bureaucrats are seen to be promoting, such as the opening of markets, deepening, integration, and expanding the EU to include countries beyond the current 25 members.

The debate and eventual failure of the European constitution demonstrated how contentious the issue could be for the European electorate, with politicians and voters often using the possibility of Turkey becoming an EU member as a rallying

point against a YES vote to ratify the constitution. The question over Turkish accession in the EU is increasingly a mobilizing force for the European electorate, despite the fact that it is not mentioned explicitly. In France, the question of EU membership for Turkey was debated in the framework of the constitutional referendum in May, and was a contentious issue in the German elections. "We will tell people that the likelihood of full EU membership for Turkey is much lower under a [CDU] government", said Matthias Wissman, head of the Europe Committee in the Bundestag, of the German Christian Democrats.¹ For many in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, the inclusion of Turkey into the European Union is a development that threatens the core identity of Europeans.

The relationship between Turkey and the European Union has always been characterized by the alternating periods of inclusion and exclusion in the European family. During the years of the Cold War, Turkey was a welcome member in European institutions such as NATO, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, with questions over the country's identity relatively irrelevant. These questions, however, would come to the fore as Turkey applied to join the core and most prestigious club of all: the European Union.

When EU membership is at stake, the issue of Turkish membership becomes a question of identity. The nature of Europe's own character and identity is the main question. And of course the question of Turkey's compatibility follows.

From the days of the Ottoman Empire to the formation of the modern Turkish state, the history of both Turkey and Europe has always intertwined, yet Europeans while recognizing the country's importance in both political and economic terms were reluctant to admit Turkey as a full member of the European realm. Ideological and religious criteria are often cited as reasons to refuse Turkey's full and equal membership. Yet, these criteria are very hard to identify, given Europe's own multitude of views on what a European identity is. For this reason, the prospect of Turkish accession is both an opportunity and challenge for Europeans to try to define their own identity.

The history of the EU demonstrates that the concept of "One Europe, One Voice" is still more wishful thinking than it is reality. True there have been important steps towards deepening integration and many barriers have been abolished. But to claim that EU members have abolished national expectations and surrendered authority to Brussels would simply be overlooking reality. National considerations still play a part in Europe; the recent blocking of the merger of industry in the "critical" energy sector is an example², as is the lagging behind of the creation of a common foreign and security policy, and continuous problems in the Europeanization of immigration policies or advancing labor mobility.

¹ Matthias Wissman, quoted in euobserver.com, 24 May 2005, <http://www.euobserver.com>

² Only recently, the French government blocked a proposed takeover of the Suez energy company by Italian firm Enel.

If separate national aspirations and experiences play a part in formulating EU policy, it is only natural that the approval of enlargement will be affected. Domestic historical experiences play a role in forming the expectations and rational or irrational fears. In the case of Turkish accession, a country with a good track record in integrating Muslim communities and multiculturalism (the UK)³ would be more welcoming than a country where the influx of immigration has created new social and economic cleavages that appear to be widening (as in France or the Netherlands).

Winning over the Hearts and Minds in Greece

Different realities lead to different expectations. In the case of Greece, historical reasons play an important role in forming public opinion on whether to accept Turkey's eventual membership or not. Turkish entry to the European family poses fundamental questions not just in strategic terms. It requires the re-examination of the way history is taught, the abolition of cultural stereotypes and changes in the way Greece perceives its place in its region.

With reference to the last point, the view of Greece, as a “beacon” of west European institutions in South East Europe is already challenged by the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in the coming year and will be further when Turkey enters. If history is cyclical, then we cannot help but notice that similarities of the region's Byzantine and Ottoman past albeit under a different point of reference; this time in Brussels and not Constantinople or Istanbul.

Political realities have so far emphasized distinction and separation, such as the debate over securing borders and increasing controls to prevent illegal crossings and immigration. This is understandable as the current EU policies aim to place clear zones of exclusion and inclusion by setting strict standards of entry for non-European citizens and allowing the free movement of people within the premises of the common market.⁴ However, as countries attain membership the nature of borders changes; the lines of separation become blurred as the physical barriers to cross – border interaction vanish.

The implications for a region with a history of turmoil are great. National histories have so far placed emphasis on separation; on creating stereotypes that played on the need to clearly demarcate the nation – state from its neighbors to ensure survival and continuation, hence the imagery of the “sneaky Greek” or the “bloodthirsty Turk”. It is easy to understand that Greece and Turkey, if they are to move from being neighbors to roommates, need to work hard on changing stereotypes.

³ It has to be noted, that the London attacks put this track record into question.

⁴ Though the free movement of labor is restricted in the case of new applicants.

It is in this field that non – governmental organisations and civil society can and should play an active role. It is not a question of using NGO’s and civil society to “manipulate” public opinion in favor of or against Turkish accession, but rather to inform the public and especially younger generations of the opportunities and advantages that a common European future can entail for both countries.

This may prove tough, given the scepticism on Turkish accession among a large number of Greeks. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, only 25 percent of Greeks view Turkish accession favorably while 45 percent don’t. The numbers are more telling when compared to the largely positive (74 percent) stance that Greeks have towards enlargement in general.⁵ Meanwhile, in Turkey, 70,5 percent of Turkish youth supports EU accession, yet 59,5 and 27,2 percent are, respectively, “a little” or “not well informed” about the European Union.⁶

In Greece, the discussion around the benefits of Turkish accession has evolved mainly around economics and security while there has been very little effort to put the debate outside this context and most importantly outside the context of the benefits and downsides that this may entail. By focusing on “guns and butter” it is easy to overlook that Turkish accession in the EU may fundamentally alter the way the two nations see and understand each other. The case of Stereo Total (the French/German alternative rock band) can serve as an example.

Greek policy makers will face an uphill battle to convince the public of the benefits that Turkish accession may hold for them. The response to the challenges of Turkey’s accession, however, goes beyond selling the idea, or informing the public. Addressing the issue as a call for a high-profile PR campaign would be to lose sight of the dynamics and challenges that the possibility of EU entry poses, for both applicant and existing members – challenges that involve values and the perception of self.

What this translates into is that both countries need to take a hard look at perceptions of each other, and put them within the EU context. The role of the NGO community would be to facilitate this dialogue and give citizens of both countries the tools to engage in honest discussion by opening channels of communication between respective parties.

These are not necessarily bilateral issues; the focus should be on the European level. For instance the re-opening of the Halki School, would be an encouraging sign that Turkey is truly on the fast track to Europe, and will also help maintain the heritage of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an institution that through its historical interaction with the Muslim world can play a positive role in bridging the gap between East and West in a world where there is much talk of a “clash of civilizations”. An honest discussion about recognizing the rights of the Ecumenical

⁵ Eurobarometer, 2005.

⁶ *The European Union in the Eyes of Turkish Youth*, ARI Movement survey, <http://www.ari.org.tr/english/turkishyouth-eu.htm>

Patriarchate and educating the Turkish public would be an important step towards entering not just an economic union, but also a union of values.

Greece too needs to take proactive steps in promoting religious tolerance. Only recently has there been a much delayed initiative for building a mosque in Athens, where there is a considerable population of Muslims.

The search for common ground can also invoke the historical experiences of Greeks and Turks who have been displaced due to the population exchange following the Treaty of Lausanne, and much later the Istanbul events of 1955.⁷ This may seem like “scratching old wounds”, but for younger generations, which have limited cultural contact with each other, the depiction of the past when ‘cohabitation of the two communities did exist’ can help a great deal in promoting understanding and tolerance. Coming from Thessaloniki, the writer of this essay can testify to many encounters with Turks in Turkey, as well as in Europe and the US, who have at least one elderly family member with fond memories of the city of Thessaloniki which until the early 20th century was a showpiece of the regions ethnic, religious and cultural “melting pot.”⁸

The role of TV and mass media should not be underestimated; though for the time being it is not safe to say that it plays a constructive role. The cross-border popularity of *Yabancı Damad*, the serial that depicts a love affair of a mixed Greek – Turkish couple is an encouraging sign, yet a careful look at the series content reveals that the characters are more often caricaturing existing stereotypes rather than trying to deconstruct them.

Dialogue and interaction should be encouraged and promoted. This should not be just part of a campaign to promote a political initiative. It should involve projects that aim to increase contact between the two countries and allow the exchange of different view points on the same subject. An example of that could be a joint visit of Greeks and Turks to places of historical or contemporary significance to both communities; examples of that could include Kemal Atatürk’s birthplace, the Halki School, or the monument to Karagoz (the Greek, Karagiozis) in Bursa.

Young people of all walks of life, and not just those involved in academia, have views and want to be heard. After all, members of our generation will be at the helm of political leadership in the coming years. The prospect of Turkey’s accession in the EU is an opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue between the two countries and to educate youth, not just on the benefits in political terms, but on understanding each other, on finding common ground. This is an opportunity that should not be missed.

⁷ The events of September 1955, where many Istanbul Greeks left the city after riots.

⁸ Mark Mazower’s book, “Salonica, City of Ghosts”, is a rare example in that it presents an informed account of the history of the city as a tale of different communities living together.
