

The Third Criterion

On the cultural dimensions of a potential accession of Turkey to the EU

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“Resolved [...] to create [...] the basis for a broader and deeper community among peoples long divided by bloody conflicts; and [to] lay the foundations for institutions which will give direction to a destiny henceforth shared”¹, six European states signed the *Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community* in the year 1951. Although the treaty expired a few months ago, the underlying thought remains a driving force. We sense a moral and historical duty to unite a long-divided continent and the necessity of sufficient institutional power and cohesion to give direction to our common future.

Today, with the accession of another ten countries to the European Union close at hand and another three countries waiting in line, we are aware that the tensions between these two principles have grown. Not only does the striving for European unity augment its economic heterogeneity and the need for institutional cohesion within the Union. The expansion of the EU towards countries, which only a few years ago we Western Europeans viewed to be on the other side of an “iron curtain”, but especially the application of Turkey with its large Muslim population also lead us to the question of a European identity. Is Turkey really a part of Europe?

All countries negotiating accession to the EU have (had) to pass what are known as the Copenhagen criteria, standards of political and economic nature, which were laid down by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. With view to the application of Turkey for EU membership, however, another criterion has dominated recent debates among politicians, intellectuals and the public: the question of cultural identity. The end of the ideological East-West antagonism and its replacement by ethnic, religious and historical conflicts facilitates the integration of Eastern European countries into the Union, but emphasises Turkey’s non-Christian character. Subjective and vague as this criterion is, it can never serve as a basis to decide upon the accession of a country to the European Union. But with this union on the one hand expanding and on the other moving closer together in terms of legal and political co-operation, the question of a European identity does necessarily receive more attention.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the European Union and Turkey and the latter’s possible accession to the EU. It gives a historical overview of the relations

between the both and specifically discusses the cultural dimensions of a potential integration of Turkey into the European Union.

Turkey and the EU – a historical overview

Geographically, Turks have been a part of Europe since their arrival in the 11th century; economically since the expansion of trade routes in the 16th century; and diplomatically since 1856 with the inclusion of the Ottoman Empire in the Concert of Europe due to its alignment with France and Britain during the Crimean War.² In the early 17th century, the Ottoman Empire fell behind the Europeans, which forced the Ottoman elite to initiate a process of “westernisation”, which was considered a tool to upgrade their power, adopted on pragmatic rather than ideological grounds.

With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the cultural aspect of the westernisation-project was laid from the hands of the intellectuals into the hands of the state. For Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the modernisation of Turkey was identical with an unconditional westernisation based on six principles: *nationalism* (establishment of a Turkish national state), *laicism* (a strict separation of religion and state, based on a French approach to religion much more militant than secularism), *republicanism* (no return to earlier forms of state such as the sultanate or the caliphate), *populism* (equality of all citizens without any regard to class, language, or belief), *etatism* (leading role of the state in economic development), and *reformism* (permanent transformation process of state and society).³

In the late 1940s, the Cold War added the important factor of security to the relations between Turkey and Europe and underlined Turkey’s strategic importance for the West. While the political aspects of the Turkish-European relationship gained importance, the cultural factor was increasingly neglected – at least from the European side. Yet the *Treaty of Rome* in 1957 and Turkey’s application for associate status in 1959 (which followed only 16 days after Greece had applied) brought the relationship between Europe and Turkey to a

¹ *Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community*, signed in Paris, April 18, 1951: http://europa.eu.int/abc/obj/treaties/en/entr30a.html_Text_of_the_Treaty (Dec. 28, 2002).

² Cf. MUFTULER-BAC, Meltem: “Through the looking glass: Turkey in Europe“, in: *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2000, p. 26.

³ Cf. STEINBACH, Udo: “Türkei“, in: Steinbach/ Hofmeier/ Schönborn (Hrsg.): *Politisches Lexikon Nahost/ Nordafrika*, 3. überarbeitete Aufl., München 1994, p. 284.

new supranational level and a dialogue that did not only take place between the Turkish state and the European states, but also between their respective societies.⁴

The *Ankara Association Agreement* between the European Economic Community and Turkey was signed in 1963 and came into force in 1964 after negotiations had been delayed several times due to reservations of some EC members, notably France, about Turkey's European identity and due to the 1960 military intervention caused by political instability in Turkey. The Agreement projected three stages for Turkey-EC relations, the second of which would aim at creating a customs union between the two while the third was intended to bring Turkey to full membership.⁵ However, no timetable was provided for this. The objectives behind the conclusion of the Agreement were on both sides mainly strategic. Turkey did not wish to be left behind Greece, which had already concluded its own agreement with the EEC, while the positive response of the EC reflected its strategic concerns to keep Turkey within NATO. Yet, while the Turks thought that the agreement was a guarantee for full membership, the EC was cautious and based the potential accession on the fulfilment of some concrete objectives.⁶

The 1970 *Additional Protocol* to the Agreement set out in a detailed fashion how the customs union would be established. However, during the early 1970s, Turkey was confronted with political instability, civil unrest and severe economic difficulties. The Cyprus crisis of 1974 further damaged the relations between Turkey and Europe. The Agreement finally broke down economically when Turkey requested a five-year freeze in its commitments in 1978 and politically after the 1980 military intervention in Turkey, the third of its kind in two decades.⁷ Relations between the EC and Europe remained more or less frozen until the mid-1980s when Turkey demonstrated both its stability and readiness for internal reforms, the hardest issue of which was the Kurdish question.

During the 1980s, Turkey's economy went through major structural changes. It moved from etatism towards market principles reducing state interventions to a minimum. Flexible exchange rates, an extensive liberalisation of the economy, a reduction of state subsidies, free movement of capital, investment programmes, and the privatisation of state-owned companies built the basis of this policy.⁸

⁴ Cf. ERDOGDU, Erkan: "Turkey and Europe: undivided but not united", in: *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June 2002: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue2/jv6n2a4.html> (Sept. 12, 2002).

⁵ Cf. *Agreement Establishing an Association Between the European Economic Community and Turkey*, signed in Ankara September 1, 1963: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ad/adc/mfa303.htm> (Dec. 30, 2002).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. ERDOGDU; and STEINBACH, p. 286.

⁸ Cf. STEINBACH, p. 292.

The growth of confidence in Turkey's economic performance and democratic stability together with Prime Minister Turgut Özal's more outward-looking foreign policy culminated in the Turkish application for full EC membership on April 14, 1987, which came as a surprise both to the EC institutions as well as the member governments. Accordingly, it took the Commission thirty months to prepare its Opinion, in which it listed its economic and political concerns with regard to the structural disparities between the EC and Turkey, the latter's high level of inflation, unemployment and industrial protection, its low levels of social protection, the inadequate human rights provisions, and the problematic Cyprus issue.⁹ Cultural concerns were not mentioned. Instead of full membership, the Opinion proposed the intensification of co-operation within the framework of the *Association Agreement* with a view to completing the customs union by 1995, while postponing full membership indefinitely.¹⁰

The Commission's decision coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, a factor that gave rise to concerns in Ankara with view to Turkey's status as strategic partner of the West. The second Gulf War and Turkey's decision to support operations against Iraq changed the environment to a certain degree, but Turkey could not overcome the weakness in the European Community's commitment to her, especially with democracy and human rights issues gaining priority in the relations between the two, a development the Turkish authorities failed to realise: "Consequently, they believed that [...] economic reforms they had been implementing since 1980 would satisfy the conditions for accession."¹¹

Despite these circumstances, the customs union between the European Union and Turkey went into force in January 1996, after Greece had lifted its veto in exchange for the European promise to open accession negotiations with Cyprus six months after the conclusion of the 1996 Inter-Governmental Conference.¹² However, contrary to the perception of advocates of the customs union within Turkey, EU officials did not link it to the perspective of full membership, but viewed it solely as a mechanism to improve co-operation. The

⁹ *Commission Opinion on Turkey's Request for Accession to the Community*, December 20, 1989 (approved by the European Council on February 5, 1990: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ad/adab/opinion.htm> (Dec. 30, 2002).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ KAHRAMAN, Sevilay Elgun: "Rethinking Turkey-European Union relations in the light of the enlargement", in: *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2000, p. 5.

¹² Critics of this union have raised attention to the fact that it serves the interests of the 15 EU Member States and decisions concerning it emerge as a result of a bargaining process within the EU. Consequently, for a non-EU member like Turkey, unable to voice her interests in this bargaining process, the customs union might be detrimental to her interests. Turkey, according to these critics, is only in the position of an "implementer", but not a "decision-maker". Therefore, the customs union does not bring Turkey closer to equality in the EU, but merely makes it dependent on the Union. Cf. ERDOĞDU.

completion of the union was mainly driven by the fear of the Europeans that otherwise Turkey might become disillusioned with the EU and reorient her foreign policy eastward.

In July 1997, before the Luxembourg Summit, which was to bring the EU-enlargement process to a new stage, the Commission disclosed a report entitled *Agenda 2000* in which it excluded Turkey from the enlargement process on the grounds of the classic political and economic arguments.¹³ At the Summit itself, however, the EU decided not only to set up a special strategy to prepare Turkey for accession, but also to create a special procedure to review the developments to be made.¹⁴ The Turkish government found this approach discriminatory, underlining the contrast between the pre-accession strategy devised for other countries and that for Turkey and rejecting the decision of the EU to begin accession negotiations with Cyprus in 1998 on the grounds that this was contrary to international law and aimed at “destroying the principal of equality [between the Turkish and the Cypriot side; the author] which is the basis of the Cyprus issue”¹⁵. Turkey suspended all dialogue with the EU and signalled a shift of priorities in its foreign policy towards Central Asia.

This led the Europeans to reconsider their policy towards Turkey. Thus, at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, the EU agreed to accept Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. The Nice Treaty, however, which sets out the institutional framework of the EU from 2005, was designed for an EU with 27 members and thus excluded Turkey. As a consequence of Turkey’s efforts to remedy this situation, the EU decided to add a footnote to the “Protocol on the Enlargement of the Union”, which declares that the assessments on the future institutional framework of the Union are based on the number of countries with which accession negotiations have already begun.¹⁶

On March 8, 2001, the EU Commission declared an accession partnership for Turkey which was followed by the announcement of the Turkish government of a National Program for the Adoption of the EU *acquis* eleven days later.

The last meeting before the introduction of the EURO was held in Laeken, in December 2001. At this summit, the candidate countries were divided into two groups, the first of which consisted of ten countries with which the EU wanted to bring the accession negotiations to a successful conclusion by the end of 2002, while the second group of two

¹³ Cf. *Agenda 2000*: http://europa.eu.int/comm/agenda2000/index_en.htm (Dec. 30, 2002).

¹⁴ Cf. Luxembourg European Council: *Presidency Conclusions*, Press Release, Luxembourg December 12, 1997: <http://ue.eu.int/Newsroom/LoadDoc.asp?BID=76&DID=43659&from=&LANG=1> (Dec. 31, 2002).

¹⁵ *Statement of the Turkish Government Regarding the Luxembourg Summit (Accession Negotiations With Greek Cypriots)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Information Department, December 14, 1997 (unofficial translation): <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupb/ba/baa97/december/02.htm> (Dec. 31, 2002).

¹⁶ Cf. ERDOGDU.

countries was given the prospect of the opening of accession negotiations in 2002.¹⁷ Turkey was not included in this ‘10+2’ formula. In the Presidency Conclusions, the EU mentioned “the prospect of the opening of the accession negotiations with Turkey”¹⁸, but the questions “when” and “how” were again left unanswered.

One year later, after increasing pressure from the Turkish side that was held up even during the time of parliamentary elections and the following substantial change in the party system and with increasing pressure from the US, the Copenhagen European Council drew the following conclusion: “If the European Council in December 2004, on the basis of a report and a recommendation from the Commission, decides that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria, the European Union will open accession negotiations with Turkey”¹⁹. This statement offers Turkey the concrete date she had called for, but links potential accession negotiations to criteria that will be hard to fulfil in the short term of only two years. It is therefore only another step in what ERDOGDU calls the “keeping close-strategy”²⁰, a scheme the EU has been following for quite some time now in order to keep Turkey within its sphere of influence yet delaying Turkey’s accession for the foreseeable future.

the cultural criterion

History proves the existence of a certain reservation of the EU towards the question of Turkish EU-membership that cannot possibly stem alone from the economic challenges an accession of Turkey would undoubtedly bring nor from the question mark behind Turkey’s political stability and the human rights issue. Other candidate countries and even member states pose similar economic challenges to the EU or leave much to wish for in terms of human rights and the rule of law. If the EU is so unconvinced of Turkey’s European nature, why at all does it continue its accession negotiations with this country and why were they ever begun?

First of all, Turkey’s large and rapidly expanding market offers many business and investment opportunities for EU companies. Moreover, its geographic location at the

¹⁷ Cf. *EUROPA – Enlargement*, Weekly Newsletter, December 18, 2001:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/newsletter/weekly_191201.htm (Jan. 2, 2003).

¹⁸ Cf. *Presidency Conclusions: European Council Meeting in Laeken*, 14 and 15 December 2001:

http://www.ecre.org/eu_developments/laonc.pdf, S. 3 (Jan. 2, 2003).

¹⁹ *Copenhagen European Council: 12-13 December 2002: Executive Summary*, the European Commission’s Delegation to Australia and New Zealand, December 13, 2002:

http://www.ecdel.org.au/whatsnew/Copenhagen_Exec_Summary.htm (Jan. 2, 2003).

²⁰ ERDOGDU.

crossroads of Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East presents EU companies with a perfect export base for Eurasia and the Middle East and a connection with the important energy sources of these two regions. It is this geographic location that simultaneously explains the strategic interest Europe has in Turkey. The Soviet threat that Turkey once served to contain at the south-eastern flank of Europe has been replaced by other conflicts in the Caucasus, Iraq and the Middle East. It is therefore in the EU's best interest to ally itself strongly with Turkey. Also, a Turkey left without its European perspective might result in its people turning towards other forces to identify with, a development that could result in the destabilisation of Turkey and a threat to Europe's south-eastern border.

What then are the criteria that seem to define Turkey's non-European status? Helmut Schmidt, German chancellor from 1974-1982, recently wrote in an article in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* that Islam lacked developments such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the separation of cleric and political authority that were so decisive for European culture.²¹ The ensuing conclusion, that Turkey as a Muslim country could therefore not be a part of Europe, was taken for granted.

Turkey is indeed a Muslim-dominated country. Since the reforms of the republic in the 1920s, however, religion and state have been strictly separated by the policy of laicism. It is often argued that this policy is not carried by society and therefore needs rigid enforcement by the state and the military under the cover of which these two restrict human rights and political organisation.²² Whereas the second reproach does apply to certain government practices²³, it is however not true that the state and the military have stood alone in defending laicism and the secular republic. In 1997, it was business and labour unions much earlier than the military that came out against the coalition government formed between the Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) under Necmettin Erbakan and the Doğul Yol Partisi (True Path Party) under Tansu Çiller.²⁴ Earlier in 1995, after the strengthening of the Refah Partisi in that year's elections, hundreds of citizens' platforms emerged almost overnight, among them many

²¹ Cf. SCHMIDT, Helmut: „Sind die Türken Europäer? Nein, sie passen nicht dazu“, in: *Die Zeit*, Hamburg 12 December 2002 (the same article features a contrasting position presented by Michael Thumann under the subtitle „Ja, sie gehören in die EU“).

²² Cf. WEHLER, Hans-Ulrich: „Das Türkenproblem: Der Westen braucht die Türkei – etwa als Frontstaat gegen den Irak. Aber in die EU darf das muslimische Land niemals“, in: *Die Zeit*, No. 38/2002, Hamburg: http://www.zeit.de/2002/38/Politik/print_200238_tuerkei.contra.html (Sept. 24, 2002) and SIEMONS, Mark: „Dilemma: Kann es in der Türkei einen demokratischen Islam geben?“, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frankfurt 5 December 2002.

²³ The use of which has constantly been criticised by the EU and is one of the main factors that will decide to opening of accession negotiations in 2004.

²⁴ Cf. TOPRAK, Binnaz: *Religion & State in Turkey*, Tel Aviv 2001, p. 2: <http://www.dayan.org/mel/toprak.pdf> (Jan. 3, 2003); Binnaz Toprak is Professor of Political Science at the Bosphorus University, Istanbul. She delivered this lecture at a conference of the Moshe Dayan Center [for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University] on “Contemporary Turkey: Challenges of Change” in June 1999).

women's platforms through which support was to be organised in the case of harassment for not wearing a scarf.²⁵ And in a survey representative of all of Turkey, 67 percent said they did not approve of interference of religion in political and state affairs, as opposed to 16 percent who favoured religious interference (the rest did not answer).²⁶ On the whole, Turkish society is quite tolerant of different lifestyles. Asked if they would object if most women in their neighbourhood wore scarves, 85 percent said no. On the other hand, a great majority would neither object if most women in their neighbourhood wore miniskirts.²⁷ This shows that there is abundant tolerance towards different lifestyles, and a strong resistance to politicisation of what are obviously considered private issues. The separation of religion and state is therefore a policy, which is carried and supported by the majority of the Turkish population. And it is this conviction of Turkish society that explains its identification with Europe as an explicit dissociation from other forms of society and state dominant in country's surrounding Turkey on its southeastern flank.

Why then is there such support for parties like the above mentioned Refah Partisi or the Islamic Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party; AKP) that won the last Turkish parliamentary elections in November 2002? Since the early 1970s, Turkey's party system includes an Islamic party, which was prohibited by the military time and again, but always re-emerged under a different name, under almost the same leadership and with a similar party programme. After the military intervention in 1980, a new ideology, the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis", was introduced by the military, postulating three pillars: the family, the mosque, and the barracks. Although the state supported this ideology only briefly, it opened the way for Islamic movements to flourish, receiving additional nourishment through the state suppression of left-leaning or even liberal ideas.²⁸

The drastic break with the former concept of etatism and an introduction of market economy in the 1980s led to a withdrawal of state subsidies and an inflation of the Turkish lira almost destroying the Turkish middle class and further impoverishing the urban poor, which at that time still constituted 60 percent of the Turkish population.²⁹ Furthermore, as the Turkish economy became subject to world market forces, the small merchants, little businessmen, and artisans – that still dominate Turkish economy today – all lost out. They had no voice in organised labour unions and eventually they gave their support to the Islamic movement.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 2f.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁹ Cf. STEINBACH, p. 290.

In the end, it is the very reason that drives many people of developing countries and countries in transition into the arms of conservative or even fundamentalist organisations, that also explains the strong support for Islamist parties in Turkey: These parties not only denounce the exploitation of the working class, but they emphasise traditional values that appeal to the urban population. Moreover, these parties are highly organised and play a great social role, thus filling the vacuum left by the state. Party members distribute food on cold winter days, they help the sick land a hospital bed or the family suffering the loss of a loved one with the funeral costs and moral support. In this endeavour, these parties rely upon “an army of covered women”³⁰, who until now have never occupied any public space, but who can now leave the house in the name of a cause. Ultimately, Islamist parties have become a gateway to political power, social status and intellectual prestige for people who have so far been marginalised by the republican ethos.

It is the well-known lesson of September 11, 2001 that applies to any country combating religious extremism. Only if the perspective of a better future exists for the children of all parts of that country’s population does extremism of any kind lose the basis to build its house upon. Turkey seeks to provide its citizens with such a perspective through membership in the European Union and the political and economic criteria it has to fulfil in this endeavour will open up new chances not only to the country’s working class, but also to the Kurdish minority and other fringe groups. An objection to Turkish EU-membership after all the promises that have been made could therefore have a disastrous effect on the ideological orientation of the Turkish state and its society towards the West. On the other hand, however, Turkish EU-membership could serve as signal and symbol towards Muslims living in Europe, in Turkey and the rest of the world that the often invoked picture of a “clash of civilisations” is a view the European Union does not share. Identity is not static, esp. not in a union with fifteen, soon twenty-five, member-states. We as European citizens already share our daily lives with people from other parts of the world and very often we do much better than pictured in the media.

We must therefore ask us, in how far our reservations concerning Turkey are motivated by a sense of danger that Turkey’s Muslim character might pose to our societies and in how far we use Turkey’s otherness to ascertain our undefined European identity. Fact is that we – European citizens as well as EU officials – need to learn a lot more about Turkey in order to be able to lead a discussion concerning this issue that is free from prejudices and the play on fears of the working man. It is therefore hard to understand why the European

³⁰ TOPRAK, p. 5.

Union would organise meetings such 1995 Toledo conference on Mediterranean co-operation and dialogue and then not implement any of the suggestions made by the scholars and intellectuals assembled at this conference. Jacques WAARDENBURG, who took part in this meeting, attributes this to the fact that “Islamic” matters within the EU itself and relations between the EU and the Mediterranean Muslim countries as well as Turkey are dealt with in different departments in Brussels.³¹ Moreover, he observes a tendency of these departments to let their policies be guided by pressures from political and religious bodies rather than by sound knowledge on the societies of Muslim countries.³²

A lot of educational work needs to be done on EU-level as well as the European national level, a work that should strive for highlighting the similarities between our cultures rather than their differences and that should be driven by the endeavour that the borders between our cultures shall not remain those between rich and poor. Incorporating an Islamic country such as Turkey in a Western association provides us with a historic chance that must not be wasted.

³¹ WAARDENBURG, Jacques: “Europe and its Muslim neighbours: recent meetings of intercultural dialogue”, in: Seufert/ Waardenburg (eds.): *Turkish Islam and Europe/ Türkischer Islam und Europa: Europe and Christianity as reflected in Turkish Muslim discourse & Turkish Muslim life in the diaspora*, Beirut Texts and Studien Bd. 82: Türkische Welten Bd. 6, Istanbul 1999, p. 135.

³² Ibid.

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