

Will Turkey Find Its Way to Europe ?

Saturday 3 February 2007, by [Andreas Marchetti](#)

Source : Qantara.de 2007

At the close of 2006, the EU commission presented its progress report on Turkey's accession to the EU, identifying the country's achievements as well as failures. Andreas Marchetti reports on the background and prospects of the negotiations.

Instead of emotionally overburdening individual issues, the reasons for wanting accession must be made clearer, Marchetti argues.

In its progress report presented last November 8, the commission clearly issued stern words of warning to Turkey. In addition, on account of Ankara's continued refusal to allow Cyprus access to Turkish ports and landing facilities, let alone recognize this EU member state, the commission soon afterwards recommended a partial freeze on accession negotiations.

The recommendations, since accepted by EU member states, called for a stop to those negotiation chapters affected by Turkey's non-compliance with the additional protocol of the Ankara Agreement.

Although the commission strived to be fair and objective, this latest crisis has succeeded in further polarizing not only supporters and opponents of Turkish membership and also the EU and Turkey. The growing polarization, as well as the emotional reaction that this issue provokes, once again shows that meeting membership criteria is not only a matter of fulfilling technical and legal conditions, but also deals with matters of culture and values.

In the final analysis, all candidates for EU membership must face these double demands. If one is to believe recent surveys, Turkey's blocked entry to the EU is not only based on its current technical and legal difficulties, but also due to differences on the level of culture and values. This raises the question of what Ankara can or even must do in order to achieve membership in the EU.

Cyprus - bone of contention

Turkey's relationship to the EU member Cyprus has been the dominant theme over the past weeks and months. Regardless of how one assesses the events of 2004, namely the support of the Annan plan by Turkish Cypriots and its rejection by Greek Cypriots, the current state of affairs must be accepted as fact.

In 2004, Turkish Cypriots supported the Annan plan for the island's unification - Greek Cypriots rejected it. Correspondingly, the EU has adopted the supposedly simple position that Turkey has to recognize Cyprus in one form or another, although this will not necessarily lead to a solution of the actual problem. The offered "compromise" refrains from demanding an immediate recognition under international law, but does insist on Cypriot access to Turkish ports and airports.

After its presidential and parliamentary elections this year, Turkey will gradually have to move in the direction laid down by the EU or else see the accession negotiations bogged down in a state of permanent crisis.

Exceptions will receive severe attention

This goes hand in hand with the main component of the “negotiations,” namely the acceptance and implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

According to the commission report, Turkey has already shown progress in this area, even though many changes still need to be made. On the whole, it can improve its European prospects by exhibiting a greater pace of reform in less problematic or contentious areas, thereby emphatically signaling its readiness for reform.

It will be essential that Ankara ensures the implementation and enforcement of European standards in every part of the country, as any exception will receive severe attention.

Special efforts will be required for subsequent reforms in the areas of civilian and military relations as well as in better delineating between the secular and religious spheres. A reform of the military in terms of its political power and influence will directly question Turkey’s sense of national identity or at least that held by the country’s influential elite.

Reticence in religious matters

It would be conceivable, considering Turkey’s location on the edge of the EU, for its army to be better integrated in the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). On the secular-religious front, a clearer division of religion and state must be established, whereby the Turkish state stops meddling in religious affairs.

Pope Benedict in Istanbul’s Blue Mosque during his visit last year | This by no means conflicts with the demand that religious communities accept the secular state and its values and norms.

Reciprocity in religious affairs must be guaranteed. The prevention of non-Muslim religious communities in Turkey from practicing their faiths merely plays into the hands of opponents of Turkish membership. On the other hand, the visit by the Pope last year could provide a new impetus towards a more balanced position.

In particular, issues dealing with culture and values and how these issues are dealt with publicly make clear how differently discussion is being conducted in the EU and in Turkey. As such, the Turkish leadership would be well advised not only to observe and partake in national and, occasionally, nationalist discussions at home, but also to increasingly pay attention to what is being said in Europe.

This implies that Turkey and the EU both show a greater respect for each other’s sensitivities.

No “entitlement” to membership

In order to assure a successful continuation of accession negotiations, it will be necessary for both partners not to fall hostage to any individual issue – and this also includes the Cyprus problem.

The EU remains firm in its demand for Turkey to unilaterally recognize Cyprus, while Turkey’s resolute policy of non-recognition not only puts accession negotiations at risk, but also, indirectly at least, continues the isolation of northern Cyprus.

After all, it could be expected that following recognition of Cyprus, at least in practice, the isolation of northern Cyprus would cease within a foreseeable time frame, even if the EU currently disputes this assertion.

Instead of emotionally overburdening individual issues, the reasons for wanting accession must be made clearer. The most frequently cited argument that Turkey has been “entitled” to membership since 1963 is insufficient in the long run both for Turkey and the EU.

Only when Turkey succeeds in producing good reasons – both for itself and for Europe – to support Turkish membership in the EU will the chances for the realization of its dreams improve. Current public opinion overwhelmingly views Turkey’s prospects as negative.

Step-by-step integration

Turkey, on its part, has not engaged in any real attempt to change this. There is the need to recognize that the domestic as well as European public play an important role in this process. In addition, the Turkish communities living within the EU should be included in the membership strategy, as they characterize the image of Turkey in the eyes of most Europeans and thereby contribute to Turkey’s membership chances.

With many issues still unresolved and numerous question marks hanging over Ankara’s European prospects, it might be worthwhile to consider whether the present dilemma can be overcome through the concept of a step-by-step integration process, which is increasingly finding its way into the public and, thereby, the political debate.

Although the prospects for membership remain in danger, a step-by-step integration process could lessen tensions as opposed to the alternatives presented by the current negotiation framework – either full membership or maintaining the status quo.

Despite current problems in bilateral relations, the EU nonetheless has a fundamental interest in close or even closer relations with Turkey, especially in terms of strategic and energy concerns.

Finally, the question of the EU’s definitive form is currently a matter of contention between various political groups. This is also something to keep a careful watch on in order to avoid any further polarization.

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Translated from the German by John Bergeron