

EU's regional policy and Kurdish question

Wednesday 23 April 2008, by [Cengiz Aktar](#)

The Republic of Turkey has a credibility problem regarding solutions to the Kurdish question. Accepting Kurds as interlocutors seems difficult for those ruling elites whether they are old-style Kemalists or new-fashion Islamists.

Turkish governments' approach to comparable situations in other countries and mainly their stance on the Cyprus question shows a clear double standard. On Cyprus, policies to introduce an independent state, if not a federal structure are brought up, whereas a strictly centralist and "Unitarian" approach is adopted for the solution of the Kurdish issue. This is a vast contradiction.

Involvement of Cypriot Turks in the island's affairs with Cypriot Greeks on an equal basis was the single issue that has killed all formulas found to date. The solution of the Kurdish issue shares the same fate in Turkey.

Rauf Denktaş, former president of the Turkish Republic of northern Cyprus (TRNC), has a saying, "the only relationship Cypriot Greeks want to engage in with Cypriot Turks is domination." This attitude is reproduced in the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Cypriot Greeks having sovereignty over Cypriot Turks in Cyprus corresponds to that of Turks against Kurds and all minorities alike in Turkey.

In light of these basic facts what kind of realistic ways can we find out from this bottleneck? Could the European Union accession process and primarily the union's regional policies facilitate a solution?

Influence of EU's regional policies over regionalization

Theories of region relate to various methods of intervention by inhabitants in the administration of their localities. The EU is where region and regional approaches apply the most. Unfortunately, the concept is ill fated in Turkey as the word "bölge" derives from the root "böl" that means "divide," which echoes division and secession.

In force since 1975 to reduce the development gap between various regions, the EU's regional policy essentially gives priority to local and regional structures over central authorities. Since the beginning, the European Commission, the executive arm of the policy, developed intense cooperation with local and regional authorities to reduce the influence and weight of centers in the allocation of the so-called "structural funds." Through regional policy, regionalization in member states has become one of the pillars of EU's integration. For detailed information: (www.ec.europa.eu/regional_policy).

Regional structures initially inexistent have been established in countries benefiting from structural funds such as Portugal (five regions), Greece (13 regions) and Ireland (eight regions). Not just these countries, but Britain as well benefited from the dynamics of regionalization. Regionalization in Scotland and Wales became stronger and triggered institutional reforms of 1998 in the U.K. Today in the EU, there is an ongoing regionalization process varying among countries depending on distinct experiences rather than a rigid single concept of region.

The addressee of regional policies is often an economic structure. That is, a sub-national structure targeting economic, social, necessarily cultural, and eventually political development of a particular region even if it is the central administration's local agent.

Ten Central and Eastern Europe countries, which joined the EU on May 1, 2004, underwent radical

institutional and administrative transformation. The process in those countries with a tradition of strong central communist regimes, reminiscent of the administrative structure in Turkey, did not proceed easily. Despite this, central administrations transferred authority and resources to local administrations, as administrative structures were reviewed top to bottom to strengthen democracy with the objective of EU membership and to benefit from the EU's structural funds.

In this process, there is no example of political regionalization. Regionalization through existing local administrations is seen in Hungary and Romania as administrative regionalization is observed in six out of 10 countries. The Czech Republic and Poland preferred decentralization, as in France. In the Czech Republic, the EU process set precedence for the first-ever formation of regional structures and led political actors take these new structures into consideration gradually. Similar developments took place in Poland and the country has evolved into a regionalization that was never seen before.

Could EU's regional policy be a remedy for Turkey's hyper-centralized administration?

In terms of regional structures there are four pieces of legislation so far: A statistical study done in the framework of harmonization with the EU, dividing the country into statistical units; the Local Administration Law; the Law on Development Agencies and a draft Public Administration Basic Law.

The legislation and corresponding structures are inadequate in terms of EU harmonization. Concept of "regional administration" is not mentioned in any of the existing or pending legislation. The legislation foresees that cultural, agricultural services, tourism, public works, education and health services are to be provided by local administrations. However the transfer of authority is nothing but "deconcentration" or local contracting of centrally decided works. In such subcontracting of services, authority and accountability is transferred to the local administration or to the regional development agency by the central administration. But while the subcontractors are granted power of execution they don't decide about the substance or the financing of the contracts.

The Law on Development Agencies, dated January 2006, targeting regional development doesn't even include the word "region" in the title. This piece of legislation is a good example of centralist approach in regional administration. The law grants broad authority and accountability to the State Planning Organization (DPT), a highly centralist structure who, inter alia, is responsible for those development agencies. Hence regional development agencies operate like the DPT's sub-offices.

An important feature of development agencies is their being established for 26 regions, as a result of an EU inspired statistical classification conducted by the DPT that resulted in 26 NUTS II (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) level statistical regions.

However agencies have very limited resources, estimated to be around YTL 614 million in 2004 for the entire country.

Contrary to Turkey, regional development agencies in EU countries are as autonomous as possible. They can be in form of private sector companies, foundations, municipality companies and NGO's.

Shortcomings of Turkish regional policy haven't been eliminated in current and pending laws and that has serious negative consequences.

The first disadvantage is limiting opportunities to profit from EU's structural funds. Regional actors decide as much as central authorities upon use and allocation of structural funds. Existing rules in Turkish legislation fail to meet this requirement.

Lack of capacity is another drawback. By comparison to lobbying activities in Brussels run by European cities and regions and their influence over public policies as well as funding, current Turkish procedure to empower sub-national administrations looks totally inadequate. Such weakness debars regional and local

administrations from the opportunities of interregional or intercity cooperation and partnership too.

Present legislation doesn't constitute either a remedy for shortcomings in public-private sector cooperation and to the comprehensive approach covering different business sectors, programming, transparency and cooperation among regional stakeholders.

Finally the existing system is inadequate for the transfer of authority to local and regional administration as a *conditio sine qua non* for good and effective governance.

As a matter of fact, the EU's 2006 Progress Report mentions that since Turkey created in 2002 26 statistical regions at NUTS II level and 81 regions (provinces) at NUTS III level there is no significant improvement in the area of regional organization. In parallel with the NUTS II organization, most institutions in Turkey continue to use the traditional geographical regions as the main reference. Although some statistical developments were reported, these statistical regions are not compatible with any administrative structures at central, regional and local levels. The EU says that statistical works done so far do not correspond to the daily implementation and functioning.

Initiatives should originate from regions

We know that the government refrains from positive discrimination in economic development despite economic and social situation in the eastern regions is as serious as to require a separate ministry.

Despite enormous differences for instance Ağrı in the East is taken up at the same category with Kocaeli in northwestern Turkey. The latest EU data show income level of the poorest five regions in the East is 33-53 percent of the national income level compared to that of the richest five in the West that hovers at 127-190 percent of the national income.

The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) solution is limited to community based charity approach through AKP municipalities, as prospective winners of the 2009 local elections. The government's utilitarian approach at the core of the solution to the Kurdish issue is sheer patronage that excludes the inhabitants from the solution making process on regional issues.

No one should expect the AKP government to loosen up the centralist structures. The issue, therefore, is decentralization through the proper use of existing financial and human resources. To achieve this, candidacy to EU membership is a golden opportunity that not each country has.

Today, Turkish regions, as regions of a negotiating country have been offered financial resources unseen before. In addition to 550 million euros annual contribution by the EU, European Investment Bank (since 2000 10 billion euros for 68 projects), Council of Europe Development Bank, German Development Cooperation's KfW Development Bank, credit opportunities provided by international financial institutions, primarily the World Bank, the U.N. Development Program, Japanese International Development Agency and French Development Agency provide very suitable credit lines for the benefit of, among other beneficiaries, Turkey's regions and municipalities.

Half of the EU aid worth 1,758 billion euros for the period 2008-2010 will be devoted to rural and regional development projects. Regional development programs will be implemented in the poorest provinces of Turkey: Ağrı, Van, Mardin, Erzurum, Urfa, Antep, Kayseri, Malatya, Trabzon, Kastamonu, Samsun, Hatay, with per capita income level below the 75 percent of the national average. Development projects include transportation, environment including water and waste management, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency, in addition to support to SMEs, education, health infrastructures and information technologies.

Rural development projects include investments in processing and marketing of agricultural products and diversification of rural economy.

Conclusion

Federalism is not part of the political history of the East. But Turkey's EU accession process could be a reasonable and practical way to address the problems arising from a hypercentralized administration as well as the concerns of citizens living in non-privileged regions of the country and who would like to have their say in the their future.

New opportunities and rights brought to citizens throughout the implementation of the regional policy suggest that the continuation and acceleration of Turkey's EU process is vital. In parallel, due understanding and proper use of possibilities and financial resources are necessary.

Last not least, to raise awareness on the openings offered by the regional policy techniques and to evaluate the prospects of decentralization and regionalization in Turkey a comprehensive report by the EU institutions, for instance by Parliament could be very meaningful.

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Sources

Source : Tuesday, April 8, 2008 TDN