

THE VIEW FROM TURKEY

**The text of *Cengiz Çandar*'s presentation at the Wilson Center
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“The view from Turkey” could be quite a misleading title for presenting a Turkish opinion on Turkey’s EU saga, even for many in Turkey, it is rather Turkey’s EU adventure. This is humbly “a Turkish view” on that mutually adventurous road both for the Turks and the Europeans, the road of Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

The Wilson Center’s European alumni meeting dealing with Turkey-EU relations coincides with a flurry of meetings with similar topics being held in Istanbul. One of them has the title as “A Stormy Autumn for Turkey-EU Relations.” The state and the characteristics of Turkey’s relations with the EU, perhaps, is more cynical than such a title suggests. For instance, only a day ago, the German Chancellor Ms. Angela Merkel was hosted here in Istanbul during a dinner given to his honor by her Turkish counterpart, the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, few blocks away where we are holding our alumni meeting. This is the Holy month of Ramadan and the dinners are occasions for breaking the daylong fasting. The fast is broken by prayer and then the dinner starts according to the Muslim rite. Ms. Merkel, naturally, was not fasting and the dinner to her honor opened not by a prayer reciting verses from the Holy Koran, but by playing Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s immortal piece, The Turkish March. And, it ended with Ludwig von Beethoven’s Ode of Joy, which is considered as if the national anthem of the transnational European Union of today. Such a thing is very peculiar to Turkey. That alone may demonstrate the flexibility of Muslim Turkey in coopting itself to the European Union.

On the eve of the historical decision of the European Union at its Brussels Summit, December 17, 2004, Heather Grabbe, an expert on enlargement,

who is currently an advisor to Olli Rehn, the Commissioner in charge of Enlargement had issued a report on what will be awaiting Turkey during the accession talks. She wrote the following introductory remark in her essay:

“Turkey has succeeded in completing the first group of Herculean tasks set by the EU. Ten years ago, it was hard to imagine that Turkey would abolish the death penalty, permit children to learn in Kurdish and place a civilian in charge of national security. Less than a decade ago, the military forced an Islamist party out of government. Now the successor to that party has made Turkey a more liberal democracy. The Turkish political system proved itself capable of radical and very positive change.”

This was prior to the start of accession negotiations. As a matter of fact, each milestone on Turkey’s road of starting the accession negotiations proved to be a very painful episode in the relations. December 17 (2004), the Brussels Summit that the decision of the European Council for starting the accession negotiations with Turkey is reached at the last minute, even at the last second after tortuous bargaining. October 3 (2005), the signing ceremony for opening the chapters for accession has become possible only after stopping the clock in Luxembourg and taking the GMT as valid thanks to the British Presidency which was very enthusiastic to keep Turkey on board. June 12 (2006), the closing of the first chapter, a sign of consolidating Turkey’s process of accession had been another long, painful day of bargaining that culminated in a press conference late at night shared by grim faced “partners” on the table, the Austrian Presidency represented by its Foreign Minister Ms. Ursula Plassnik, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn and Turkey’s Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül. The rosy mood on the eve of December 17, 2004 has been darkened for both sides and the relations entered a period of steady trouble.

For the European Union, the enlargement fatigue had a primary role in the gradual deterioration of the relations with Turkey, whereas for Turkey, it has been the disillusionment from the EU’s attitude. For the Turks,, the EU was changing the rules of the game while the game is being played.

That state of affairs had been anticipated. Heather Grabbe indicated the inherent problems of the accession process for Turkey in the conclusion of her essay:

“‘Negotiations are a humiliating process’ observed one of Poland’s negotiators in 2004. ‘The EU makes it very clear that you are joining them, not the other way around.’ Most Turks will welcome the start of accession negotiations as confirming their country’s identity as a modern, European country. The political elite hopes that it will ensure Turkey’s future as a democracy with a stable economy...

The EU covers foreign and security policies too, many of which are very sensitive in Turkey... Turkey will find it hard to accept such a strong external influence. The practical consequences of membership negotiations will be difficult, but the change in mentality required will be even harder. The Ottoman Empire was a great power. Britain’s experience shows how hard it can be for ex-empires to accept sharing sovereignty in the EU, especially if they go on thinking that it is primarily an economic union. The Turkish republic created in the 1920s is a proud, nationalistic state with an established role in most international institutions. Its circumstances are different from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were actively seeking outside help with their post-communist transformation when they applied for EU membership.

Turkey needs to enter the negotiations with its eyes wide open. The technicalities of preparing for EU membership will require an enormous effort. But the Turkish and EU governments also have to persuade the European public and the Turkish people that accession will benefit them in the long run. The eastward enlargement of the EU was an elite-led project that succeeded despite the half-hearted support of much of the public. Turkey’s accession cannot follow that example, because it poses much greater challenges and the negotiations will start amid unpopularity...”

The last two years’, especially the last year’s experience fully confirmed the validity of this observation. We, at this very moment, stand at a point where Turkey, particularly the Turkish public and the EU publics, are staring each other with bad faith. There is, ostensibly, a growing gap of mutual mistrust. Those stereotypes and clichés in Turkey on the unreliability of the EU as “an exclusively Christian club that never would let Turkey into its ranks” are revived. Any critical or discernibly inappropriate remark by an EU official or a European statesman (they may vary from Angela Merkel to Jacques Chirac and above anybody else to Nicolas Sarkozy) on Turkey’s EU bid resonates very negatively in the Turkish public opinion and consequently influences the sharp drop in the pro-EU sentiment in Turkey. Two years ago,

that was over 70 per cent, an impressive record for a Muslim and an aspirant country compared with those percentages obtained for the 10 countries that have become EU members at the last enlargement wave in 2004.

Current opinion polls are disheartening in terms of the declining pro-EU sentiment in Turkey. Less than half of the people in the EU 25 support any further enlargement, and 48 per cent is against Turkish accession. In Austria and France, the countries that have promised referenda on Turkish accession, opposition stands at 81 percent and 54 percent, respectively. Turkey clearly suffers from an image problem. In a survey of the “national brands” of 35 countries, Turkey consistently comes last. Even Turks themselves give their countrymen low marks on such issues as integrity and efficiency.

However, there are several reasons why Turkey should not be too discouraged by current opinion polls:

- Opposition towards Turkey membership is not uniform: in ten out of 25 EU countries, there are more people in favour of Turkish accession than against.
- Opposition towards enlargement is related to a country's economic recovery and its citizens' general attitudes towards the EU. Europe's economic recovery and the recent bounce-back in support for the EU could mean that attitudes towards enlargement will also change.
- Prejudices about Turkey are superficial and largely based on ignorance.

Although a lack of knowledge is behind much of Turkey's tainted image abroad, this does not necessarily mean that more information will improve attitudes. People are attached to their national prejudices and national stereotypes. Richard Falk once observed?

“... It is evident that the diplomatic doors have nothing to do with geography and maps, and that Europe is nothing more or less, than a state of mind... Turkey was welcomed as European so long as it shared Europe's destiny of vulnerability (Cold War). NATO was an open door, as was German immigration policy during a time of labor shortage, but the European Community is another matter. The selectivity of the latter is less about human rights and democracy than about cultural identity and capital formation... Turkey is not much stranded at the European doorstep, but

confined to the servants' quarters of the European house. Can Turkey dress better and receive permission to dine with the other guests at the European table?..

Turkey is not so clearly situated when it comes to cultural and civilizational identity. If Europe remains Christian, even if only in a secular spirit, Turkey might achieve greater dignity by emphasizing its Asian and Islamic faces.”

The critical outlook of this observation seems to revive, nowadays in Turkey with the decline of support for the EU accession. Any poll or survey would indicate that the Turkish pro-Eu sentiment is measured around 50 percent. Compared to those of some Central and Eastern European countries prior to their accession in 2005, this figure should not be much worrying. However, given Turkey's Muslim identity and the growing chasm between the Muslim world and the rest in a global political climate under the strong impact of post 9/11 circumstances where we witness the upsurge of nationalist-Islamist tendencies, such a sharp decline could be interpreted as the ringing of alarm bells in terms of Turkey's losing its EU prospects or shunning its EU perspectives by the Europeans could push Turkey into uncharted waters of instability. The destabilization of Turkey might send stronger tremors to Europe than the collapse of Yugoslavia did.

Turkey is not only a geopolitical asset for Europe, being the main potential energy corridor that will transfer hydrocarbons from Transcaspian but its commanding position in the East Mediterranean, in Black Sea-Caucasus axis and providing the link between the Balkans, i.e. Southeastern Europe and the Middle East makes it integral to the security of the European Union.

The awareness of such a geopolitical element so essential for the European security is raised in the wake of the war in Lebanon during the summer of (July-August) 2006. That is reflected strikingly in the following lines of the former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's article titled “Europe grasps its interests in the Middle East.” He wrote:

“The Lebanon war has served as a harsh reminder to the European Union that it has ‘strategic interests’ – security interests first and foremost – that, should it choose to ignore them, the price will be high... With the decision of its member states to send several thousand soldiers to Lebanon to implement UN Resolution 1701, the European Union has taken the most significant decision yet within its Neighborhood Policy... After the Balkan wars of the

1990s, the Near and Middle East is at once the most dangerous and also – given security concerns- the most important neighboring region for the EU today. Why? Because the main threats to European security at the beginning of the 21st century stem from that region... War and chaos in the Middle East, or just a moral or political vacuum, will directly affect and upset the security of the EU and all its member states. Europe therefore had to act...”

Turkey, being the only Muslim country, contributed to the implementation of the UN Resolution 1701 by sending troops and the only country with institutional connections to the EU is the moral and physical muscle of the European Union in the Middle East.

Hence, as pointed out by the EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson recently in conference in Istanbul, if current tendencies towards mutual recrimination and incomprehension continue, the accession process may soon stall or even fail. This would be a major blow for the EU since it would have to admit the failure of one of its most successful policies, namely enlargement. And it could prove disastrous for Turkey if the end of the EU dream fuelled nationalism and undermined the modernisers.

In that speech at a conference organized by the Centre for European Reform in Istanbul on September 15, 2006, the EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson argued that Turkey risks becoming “the projected image of everything Europe fears about a changing world.” He said, “In the EU many of the dissenting voices on Turkey’s membership are the same voices raised against globalisation. They reflect wider questions in European society: unemployment, migration, social tensions. Genuine anxieties that need to be addressed. It is hard to have a rational debate on Turkey and the EU while Turkey is the projected image of everything we fear about a changing world.”

Insisting that Turkey also has “the power to shape the perceptions and defy the prejudices”, he proceeded saying:

“It’s easy to forget that our current borders are modern borders, and that until the eighteenth century the notion of a ‘nation’ didn’t describe lines on a map. No one would argue that the iron curtain represented an essential divide between the people it kept apart. It came down precisely because it did not. Europe’s languages, cultures and religions have always been a moving picture. Enlargement has kept pace with that picture.”

That statement inspires one to recall the great French historian Henri Pirenne that wrote in his "*Mahomed et Charlemagne*" that "For the Roman Empire, there is no Asia or Africa nor Europe. In the middle ages this Mediterranean-centered outlook gave way to the idea of Christian unity. The 'Community of Christian Princes' covered all territory under their control and excluded those parts of Europe dominated by heathens –the Baltic area and later, the Balkans. The Russian Empire belonged to the European concert, as defined by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, but the Ottoman Empire, in spite of its European territories, did not. The Soviet Union was considered part of Europe between the wars. At the same time, Kemal Atatürk's claim of the Turkish Republic belonging to Europe was widely accepted."

Turkey has legitimacy to being considered as an integral part of Europe in terms of history and philosophy of history. The EU enlargement and moreover the Europeans' respect to the law principle of *pacta sunt servanda* provides its current legitimate stand for its EU accession.

The newly introduced concepts of the EU, like the "absorption capacity", or the feeling of "enlargement fatigue" in the wake of its greatest enlargement ever in 2004 and its incapacity or indecision to aspire to be a "global power" stands as formidable obstacles on the road of accession for Turkey and to a certain extent understandable. However, they are not and should not be insurmountable. Above anything else, Europe has to abide by *pacta sunt servanda*, for, despite difficulties on the road, Turkey should be given the ultimate reward of full membership whence it meets the criteria for that. A Turkish official's response when asked to make concessions on the Cyprus issue, one of the major stumbling blocks on the road to accession, summarizes the general Turkish sentiment and approach: "How can Turkey take small steps, if it does not even know in which direction it is going?"

As a matter of fact, Europe has been a millennial vocation for the Turks ever since they have their feet in Asia Minor since 11th century. The EU prospect played a tremendously positive role in Turkey's transformation and change. It is both an impetus to further democratize and modernize, as well as being the cherished strategic goal for generations. The strongest argument Turkey can offer in the face of those who seek to slow down and even stall its accession process is an unwavering commitment to the responsibilities of

membership; not as a technical and legal obligation but as a civilizational choice and continuing with the European vocation.

The celebrated Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel laureate for 2000, in his seminal work “Istanbul – Memoirs and the City” that brought him among his other novels the greatest award in the world on literature, makes a distinction between the Western concept *melancholy* and the Turkish word *hüzün*, emphasizing that they are not synonymous. In that book, he wrote, “We begin to understand *hüzün* not as the melancholy of a solitary person but the black mood shared by millions of people together... What I am trying to describe now is not the melancholy of Istanbul but the *hüzün* in which we see ourselves reflected, the *hüzün* we absorb with pride and share as a community.”

The alienation of Turkey from the EU will regenerate the *hüzün* that the Turks absorb with pride and share as a community, but that will leave the Europeans with political melancholy that its consequences could prove to be unbearable for both sides.