

CONTESTING FOR THE “CENTER”: DOMESTIC POLITICS, IDENTITY CONFLICTS AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER EU MEMBERSHIP IN TURKEY

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I. Introduction

“Westernization” has been a major goal of Turkish political elites in the contemporary era. The roots of this interest can be traced to the late Ottoman times. Westernization in this context is synonymous with modernization, progress and reaching the highest civilizational standards; in other words, obtaining a first division status, in terms of economic performance, democratic credentials and other performance criteria that one could identify. Becoming a member of the European “club” was a natural objective in this direction. Although frequent references have been made to the value of Turkish membership in terms of its contribution to fostering inter-civilization dialogue, possible economic benefits and enhancement of European security, there is no doubt that the primary emphasis has been on the role that EU membership could play in Turkey’s own national transformation. Indeed, in the recent era, we observe the dramatic impact of the Europeanization process in Turkey motivated by the signal for full-membership in the three inter-related areas of the economy, democratization process and foreign policy behavior. In spite of a decline of momentum in recent years, it is very much a real and on-going process which would be very hard to reverse.

The paper will specifically highlight the following issues. First, different segments of Turkish society have tried to use the EU membership process as a means of expanding their domain of action or the space available in domestic politics against their principal opponents. For example, the AKP, a party of Islamist origin, pushed for Europeanization and reform in the post-2002 era. Underlying the paradoxical Europeanization drive of the AKP was the belief that the space for religious freedoms would be enlarged and the interests of the religious conservatives against the secular state elites would be protected through the EU membership process. Similarly, secularists have conceived of EU membership as a means of protecting and consolidating the secular, Western-oriented character of Turkey, hence, as a medium of preventing further Islamization of Turkish society. Indeed, both groups of have been progressively disappointed by what the EU could deliver in this context which also explains part of the loss of Euro-enthusiasm on both sides.

Second, the debates in Europe involving Turkey’s European credentials or European identity has had a deep impact on the Turkish mind-set and has raised questions about the issue of “fairness” in Turkey-EU relations even in the minds of the liberal and Western-oriented intellec-

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tuals. There is a tendency in the Turkish mind-set to see “Europe” as a monolithic bloc rather than as a contested political space. Hence, the signals coming from France and Germany, conceived as the “core” of Europe, had a profound impact in terms of turning tide from a strong support for full membership to widespread Euro-skepticism over a remarkably short space of time. The paper tries to highlight the importance of the signals originating from the EU on Turkish domestic politics and on the enthusiasm and commitment of key political actors to the EU integration process. Whilst some of the criticisms of the EU concerning the handling of the Cyprus issue, may be justified, there are also problems in Turkish elites’ conception of what it actually means to be a member of the European club. It is possible to draw certain parallels between Turkey and the new member states in this context. Whilst the benefits of membership in economic, political and security realms are welcomed, there is not an equally strong impetus in terms of pooling sovereignty and acting collectively as members of the same “club”. Compared to its Eastern European counterparts, the Turkish case appears to be characterized by a considerably lower degree of elite unity and commitment to the Europeanization and reform process. Indeed, one of the interesting features of the Turkish case is that there is considerable support for EU membership, but much less enthusiasm and commitment when it comes to comply with the conditions associated with that membership.

II. Turkey-EU Relations: From the Golden Age to a Stalemate

Turkey-EU relations historically move in terms of cycles. At the end of each cycle, Turkey moves closer and becomes more integrated to the EU. The long-term pattern is clearly in the direction of further integration. The slower the path and the greater delays on the path to membership also imply, however, that Turkey is confronted with higher barriers to entry. The threshold for membership clearly rises over time, a fact which can be illustrated by some concrete examples. When Greece became a member in 1981, the country’s democratic credentials constituted an important yardstick for membership. When Turkey pushed for EU candidacy in the late 1980s and the 1990s, the EU had become far more integrated and the criterion for entry had become not only democracy *per se*, but the quality of democracy. In the current context, Turkish membership aspirations are faced with additional hurdles. The number of EU members has dramatically increased over time and ultimately all these twenty-seven members have to endorse full-membership. Furthermore, the EU appears to have reached the limits of a top-down, elite-driven project. Public opinion and citizen participation are likely to become increasingly important over time which means that Turkey needs to cultivate not only elite support but also support at the level of the individual citizens in Europe to be able to accomplish its long-term goal of EU membership.¹

Arguably the process of “Europeanization” in Turkey in a formal sense of the term, referring to interrelated economic and political reforms in line with EU conditionality dates back to the process leading up to the inception of the Customs Union by the end of the mid-1995.² The Customs Union was important in terms of accelerating the process of trade liberalization in Turkey which had started back in 1980 and was also instrumental in promoting an important set of regulatory and democratization reforms. Yet, in retrospect, it is fair to argue that Turkey-EU re-

¹ See, in this context, Loukas Tsoukalis, *What Kind of Europe?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² For a perceptive discussion of Turkey’s recent Europeanization process, see Ioannis N. Griogoriadis, *Trials of Europeanization: Turkish Political Culture and the European Union* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

lations during much of the 1990s were faced with what Mehmet Uğur has aptly described as "the anchor-credibility dilemma".³ In the absence of the full-membership signal, the EU was not powerful enough to generate a deep commitment for macroeconomic stabilization and reforms on the part of the Turkish political elites. Similarly, the failure of the Turkish political elites to deal with endemic political and economic instability, in turn, raised fundamental question marks from the EU perspective concerning Turkey's commitment to the goal of Europeanization. The outcome was a vicious circle.

Given this background, the Helsinki Decision of the European Council in December 1999 was critical in the sense that, for the first time, Turkey was recognized as a candidate country for full-membership. The decision provided a powerful incentive for reform. Coupled with the impact of the deep economic crisis that Turkey experienced in February 2001, the EU process became particularly important in creating the mix of conditions and incentives necessary for large-scale economic reforms. Especially in the post-crisis era, Turkey experienced a kind of virtuous cycle of mutually reinforcing democratization process and economic reforms rather similar in nature to the kind of transformations that the Southern European members like Spain, Portugal and Greece had experienced during the 1980s and the Eastern European like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had gone through during the latest wave of Eastern enlargement in the course of the 1990s and the early 2000s. Although we have identified a series of important turning points in Turkey's recent formal Europeanization process such as 1995, 1999 and 2001, most analysts would agree that perhaps the golden age period was the period extending from the Summer of 2002- marked by the passage of dramatic reform package from the Parliament during the period of the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition government- to October 2005, marking the formal opening up accession negotiations.⁴ The golden age period, by and large, corresponded to the early years of the AKP government. In spite of the initial fears by many concerning the party's Islamist origins or credentials, the AKP proved to be a party of moderate standing and reformist orientation.⁵ Indeed, the AKP government during the period displayed a vigorous commitment to the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria both in the economic and political realms with the result that the European Council in its December 2004 Summit in Brussels decided to open the negotiation process without delay. For a close observer of Turkey-EU relations, this is something that few people would have expected back in December 1999 when Turkey was announced as a candidate country but the prospect of membership appeared quite distant. The Brussels decision of 2004 clearly underlined the pace of transformation and reform that Turkey had experienced during this golden age period.

This line of argument clearly suggests that there is a strong case for accelerating Turkey's push for EU membership and the associated reform process. Yet, in the current context, Turkey-EU relations have reached a point of stalemate. What we observe is the emergence of a broad coalition for special partnership which is strongly rooted both in Turkey and Europe and this

³ Mehmet Uğur, *The European Union and Turkey: An Anchor/Credibility Dilemma* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

⁴ The coalition government which came into power following the April 1999 elections was composed of the left-nationalist the Democratic-Left Party (the DSP), the ultra-nationalist the Nationalist Action Party (the MHP) and the center-right Motherland Party (the ANAP). Given the ideological orientation of the parties that made up the coalition government, it was quite surprising and paradoxical that this particular government was responsible for some of the major EU-related reforms during the summer of 2002 prior to the AKP era.

⁵ For a good collection of essays on the AKP, see Ümit Cizre, ed., *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party* (London: Routledge, 2008).

broad coalition appears to be rather insurmountable for the foreseeable future. There is no doubt that Turkey will continue to be an important regional power in the absence of EU membership. Absence of EU membership will not mean a collapse of Turkish economy or Turkish democracy. A central premise of the present study, however, is that membership of the EU has very significant benefits for Turkey and represents the first-best solution and, therefore, it is an objective that cannot be easily dismissed in favor of alternative scenarios based on the notions of privileged partnership. EU membership is important for Turkey for three important and interrelated reasons. First, Turkish economy will be in a much stronger position in the presence of a strong and long-term EU anchor. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that the principal benefits such as access to redistributive funds and related EU programs as well as the gains that are likely to accrue from the participation in the internal market actually materialize following the country's accession as a full-member. It would be interesting to refer to the experience of Eastern Europe where Euro-skepticism had grown during the transition period, but has actually declined after full-accession in the post-2004 era. Secondly, the process leading to full-membership will have quite dramatic consequences for the quality of Turkey's democratic regime. Turkish democracy, in spite of important reforms in recent years, still falls short by a considerable margin from being a fully-consolidated liberal democracy. Thirdly, Turkey's foreign policy strengths based on soft power will be significantly enhanced if it is able to act collectively with the EU as opposed to developing a series of bilateral relations with its neighboring countries.

III. The Contours of the Domestic Debate and the Loss of Momentum in Turkey's Drive for Full EU Membership

The loss of enthusiasm for the EU membership project in Turkey both on the part of the government and the public at large within a short space of time represents quite a paradox. Indeed, there was no single turning point, but several interrelated turning points and a number of factors were at work to bring about this dramatic change of mood both on the part of the AKP elite as well as the public at large. The intense debate generated in the aftermath of the Brussels Summit in 2004 concerning Turkey's European credentials particularly in core EU countries such as France and Germany has helped to create a serious nationalistic backlash in Turkey and strengthened the hands of anti-EU, anti-reform groups both within the state and the society at large. It also helped to undermine the enthusiasm of political and societal actors in Turkey which were pro-EU, in principle, but increasingly believed that Turkey will never get full-membership. The media representations of Europe in Turkey as a monolithic bloc also contributed to this change of mood. The increasing questioning of the very basis of Turkish membership and Turkey's European credentials by influential political figures in the very core of Europe such as Sarkozy in France and Merkel in Germany at a time when the decision to open up accession negotiations had already been taken made a deep impact in terms of influencing this change of mood in Turkish domestic politics.⁶ Indeed, there was a striking drop in public support for EU membership

⁶ It is important to stress that Sarkozy was an influential political figure and a potential Presidential candidate at the time of the opening up of accession negotiations with Turkey. He was elected as President in 2007. In 2004, Chirac was still the President and supported the opening of negotiations with Turkey and full membership against the majority of his party. There has been a change in the position of government when Sarkozy took Office in 2007. There is no doubt, however, that Sarkozy emerged as a powerful voice against Turkey's full-membership and started to make a deep impact both in the domestic politics of EU member states and Turkey long before his election as the President of France.

from a peak of 74 % in 2002 to around 50% by 2006 and 2007.⁷ The fact that Europe was also going through an international constitutional stalemate with the rejection of the proposed Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referenda also injected an additional mood of pessimism. Again, media representations or misrepresentations of the constitutional crisis in Turkey played a role in terms of contributing to growing Euro-skepticism by helping to project the EU as an unattractive, crisis-ridden project.

Some of the key decisions of the EU concerning Turkish accession also exercised a profound impact in terms of undermining enthusiasm at the elite level and the public at large. The first of these was the clause on the possibility of imposing permanent safeguards on full labor mobility as well as access to agricultural subsidies and structural funds following Turkey's accession to the EU as a full member.⁸ This immediately generated criticism even among the most vocal supporters of Turkey's EU membership as a clear case of unfair treatment.⁹ Whilst a temporary safeguard on labor mobility, such as the seven year transition period on the new Eastern European members, was quite understandable, the imposition of permanent safeguards on a wide range of crucial areas would be synonymous with a significant reduction in the concrete material benefits associated with full-membership. It also effectively meant that Turkey would be relegated to a second division status, a special partner position even if it were to become a full-member. Furthermore, the "absorption capacity" element attached to the Copenhagen criteria in 1993 has become progressively a vocal argument in the case of Turkish accession. The possibility that the EU had the right to reject Turkish membership on the grounds of its own absorptive capacity—an argument which has not been used systematically against a large Eastern European country such as Poland for example—appeared to have introduced an additional element of uncertainty and ambiguity to an already difficult process.

The failure of the EU to fulfill its promises to the Turkish Cypriots in return for their co-operative attitude towards the resolution of the Cyprus conflict along the lines of the UN plan for reunification of the island constituted yet another major blow. The EU's failure to deal with the Cyprus conflict problem on an equitable basis was increasingly interpreted even among key members of the pro-EU, pro-reform coalition in Turkey as yet another case of unfair treatment. The fact that the negotiations process was partially suspended due to the Cyprus dispute and specifically failure to open its ports to vessels from The Republic of Cyprus proved to be the ultimate blow in this context. The EU's unbalanced approach to the Cyprus dispute appeared to confirm the widely held perceptions among the Turkish elites and the general public that Cyprus was being used as creating yet another obstacle on the path of Turkey's full-membership, the important point being that Cyprus issue was in itself not critical and was being used as an instrument of exclusion.

There has been a powerful tendency in the domestic debate on EU membership in Turkey to link the issue of "unfair treatment" to the notion of the EU as a "Christian Club" in spite of

7 Euro-barometer results indicate public support for EU membership of slightly over 50% for July 2007. The results are available at http://ec.europa.eu/public-opinion/index_en.htm.

8 For a good discussion of the negotiating framework and its limitations from a Turkish point of view, see Kemal Kirişçi, "The December 2004 European Council Decision on Turkey: Is it an Historic Turning Point?", *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 2004).

9 See E. Fuat Keyman and Senem Aydın, "The Principle of Fairness in Turkey-EU Relations", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (Fall, 2004): 83-85.

the fact that the questioning of Turkish membership in EU documents is not based on the idea of a Christian Europe.¹⁰ If, indeed the EU is a culturally bounded project consistent with the image of a Christian Club, Turkey would never qualify for full-membership even if all the necessary reforms were to be fully implemented.¹¹ Arguably, Turkish politicians use the "Christian club" discourse as a strategy to put pressure on the EU to admit Turkey as a full-member. According to this logic, if the EU fails to accept Turkey, even if Turkey fulfills certain conditions, then it would face allegations of being exclusively Christian. Thus the burden of the proof is placed on the EU to dismiss such charges.¹² What is interesting in this discussion is the absence of any reference to potential EU candidates in the Balkans with significant Muslim populations such as Bosnia, Macedonia and Albania. It is perfectly possible for the EU to incorporate such states as full members in the future which would also allow the EU to circumvent any allegations centered on the notion of a Christian club.

Another popular statement used by the Prime Minister Erdoğan and others during the period which clearly reflected this mood of growing pessimism associated with the EU's "unfair treatment" was that the "Copenhagen criteria" should be re-phrased as the "Ankara criteria". The term, Ankara criteria, signified that the reform process was important for Turkey's own future in the political and economic realms and these criteria ought to be a reference point for progress with or without the prospect of full EU membership. In other words, the reform process that Turkey has been undergoing is important in itself and should not be overly dependent on the ambition to become a full EU member.

Another striking element to the domestic political context was the weakening commitment of the AKP leadership to the goal of full EU membership. We should take into account here the Islamist roots of the AKP. There is no doubt that the party has been significantly transformed as it has progressively moved to the very "center" of Turkish politics which became even more evident in the context of 2007 general elections whereby the liberal representation within the AKP has increased markedly. Yet, one of the core issues on the party's political agenda is the issue of "religious freedoms" and arguably the party leadership realized through encounters with some of the key decisions of the European Court of Human Rights that the domain for action for a re-

10 In the reports of the European Commission, Turkey is frequently criticized for its poor human rights record, for its treatment of minorities, insufficient implementation of reforms it has adopted, corruption, for its relations with neighbors and so on. The progress report of 2004 indicates that "Turkey's accession would be different from previous enlargements because of the combined impact of Turkey's population, size, geographical location, economic, security and military potential". European Commission, *Regular Report on Turkey's Progress Towards Accession, 2004*, available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/pdf/key_documents/2004/rr_tr_2004_en.pdf.

11 The term "Christian club" argument has frequently been used by the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In 2004, Erdoğan said that "if the EU is not a Christian club, if it is not simply an economic entity but rather a set of political values, then Turkey must be in" (Euroactiv.com, 22 October 2004). More recently, Erdoğan has reiterated the theme of the EU as a "Christian Club". In a recent visit to Poland in 2009, Erdoğan stated that "Without Turkey, EU is a Christian Club" and linked this to the issue of "unfair treatment" during the era of the country's accession negotiations. He added that the EU ought to require the fulfillment of the same conditions as it demands from other member states. He also added that the EU displays a "pre-conceived" and rather than a "fair" position towards Turkey. The statement is available at <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/76920/-without-turkey-eu-is-christian-club-turkish-prime-minister-.html>

12 For a good discussion of these issues, see Bahar Rumelili, "Negotiating Europe: EU-Turkey Relations from an Identity Perspective", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No.1 (2008): 97-110.

ligion-based party within the EU is clearly circumscribed.¹³ This might also have been instrumental in re-shaping the attitudes of the party leadership to the question of EU membership. Evidence of this loss of enthusiasm is evident by the fact that the AKP government has not actively pushed for some of the key reforms emphasized by the EU. Certain steps have been undertaken to modify the notorious article 301 of the penal code and new legislation has been introduced to protect the rights of the non-Muslim minorities. However, these measures have been implemented in a rather defensive and lukewarm manner. Given its broad mandate, the government could have taken more radical steps such as abolishing the article 301 of the penal code altogether.¹⁴ The opening of the Halki Seminary could also have represented a major move in terms of recognizing the rights of Christian minorities.¹⁵

The elections of July 2007 represented a major opportunity for the AKP to revitalize the Europeanization and reform agenda. The party emerged from the election with an even larger coalition of support and this broad-based public support could have been utilized to re-activate a large-scale reform agenda. Yet, with an exaggerated sense of its own power and a diminished sense of the importance of the EU anchor, the party leadership clearly missed an opportunity during the fall of 2007. The proposal involving a new constitution was an important reform initiative very much in line with the spirit of EU conditionality. Instead of pushing for a new constitution in a vigorous manner and trying to forge the kind of societal consensus needed to render such a radical project workable, the party's focus increasingly shifted towards the promotion of fundamental religious freedoms such as allowing female students to wear the headscarf in the universities. Arguably, the crucial mistake here was to present these issues in an isolated fashion in the form of a constitutional amendment and not as part of a broader reform package. This, in turn, helped to create a very serious backlash and even alienated liberal opinion which had hitherto been quite supportive of the AKP's reformist and moderate credentials. In an ironic fashion, the optimistic mood of the immediate post-election era was replaced by a serious re-polarization of the Turkish society culminating with the court case against the AKP in the early part of 2008 on the grounds of violating the very basis of the secular constitutional order. The consequences of these developments for Turkey-EU relations have been rather negative. From a European perspective these set of events appeared to raise fundamental question marks about Turkey's democratic credentials and have clearly empowered elements in the European society which were committed to the exclusion of Turkey on the grounds of culture and identity in any case, whilst leaving pro-Turkey elements in a highly defensive position. The eventual verdict of the Constitutional Court in the summer of 2008 did not involve the closure of the AKP, although the party ended up with a serious warning and faced monetary penalties. This decision, at least, helped to reverse the high degree of uncertainty which the court case had generated and injected an air of stability into economic and political life and created the possibility of a new opening in Turkey-EU relations.

¹³ In the case of Leyla Şahin versus Turkey of June 2004, the European Court of Human Rights decided in favor of Turkey. The banning of headscarves at the University of Istanbul did not violate Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

¹⁴ Article 301 is a controversial article of the Turkish penal code making it illegal to insult Turkey, the Turkish ethnicity, or Turkish government.

¹⁵ The Halki seminary was, until its closure by the Turkish authorities in 1971, the main school of theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church's Patriarchate of Constantinople. The European Union has raised the issue of reopening the school as part of its negotiations over Turkish accession to the EU. With the new democratization impulse in the summer of 2009, there are some indications that the government may finally display the political will necessary to resolve this long-standing issue before the end of 2009.

The EU membership process has enjoyed considerable support among different groups both in Turkey and in Europe. Otherwise, the process would not have reached the stage of accession negotiations. In Europe, whilst public support for Turkish membership has been weak, there has nevertheless been strong support among certain sections of the elite depending on their visions of the future of the EU integration process. Those elements which have been particularly favorable to Turkish membership are those which see the future of the EU more in an intergovernmental direction and at the same time envisage a strong role for the EU as a security actor. Furthermore, the same elements tend to place a very high premium on the transatlantic alliance and the role of the United States. Hence, not surprisingly Britain, the new member states and the Scandinavian countries (with the notable exception of Denmark) have emerged as important supporters of Turkish membership aspirations in recent years. Similarly, Turkish membership appears to enjoy across the board political support in all major Mediterranean countries with the notable exception of France.¹⁶ Divisions also exist across the political spectrum in individual countries. Both French and German elite and public opinion is divided on the issue of Turkish membership.¹⁷ German social democrats, even more so than their French counterparts, with their more flexible and culturally open visions of Europe tend to be more receptive to the membership of Turkey. It was after all Germany under the leadership of Schröder which provided the strongest support for Turkish membership in the process leading up to the crucial Helsinki decision of the EU Council in December 1999.¹⁸

The critical point, therefore, is that the EU is not a monolithic entity and there is sizeable actual and potential support at the elite level for Turkish membership which, in turn, can be cultivated by the Turkish political elites. The problem in the current context, however, is that this pro-Turkey coalition has become rather subdued and defensive. Similarly, the various elements which have been supporters of EU membership in Turkey appear to have lost much of their enthusiasm and commitment. In contrast, the opponents of Turkey's EU membership have become much stronger and vocal and have effectively formed a grand coalition in favor of Turkey's exclusion from the EU. On the surface, Turkey-skeptics in Europe and the Euro-skeptics in Turkey tend to be quite different. Turkey-skeptics in Europe strongly embodied in the personalities of leaders like Sarkozy and Merkel is that Turkey is not a natural insider in a culturally bounded vision of Europe and the associated deep integration process. Euro-skeptics in Turkey, on the other, feel that European integration and its associated conditionalities will tend to undermine the unity and the secular nature of the Turkish state.¹⁹ Looking beneath the surface, however,

¹⁶ Even in France, however, public elites are divided on the issue of Turkish membership. There appears to be certainly much more support on the left for Turkish membership. Indeed, a former Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, has written a monograph entitled *Oui a la Turquie*, Turkish Translation: *Avrupa Birliği Yolunda Türkiye'ye Evet* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2009) outlining what he considered to be the benefits of Turkish membership for the future course of the European integration process.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that French and German public opinions are on the same line, with 60 percent of the public being against Turkish membership based on Euro-barometer surveys. Moreover, this pattern has been broadly stable over the past few years.

¹⁸ For a detailed treatment of the components of the pro-Turkey coalition within the EU see Ziya Öniş, "Turkey's Encounters with the New Europe: Multiple transformations, Inherent Dilemmas and the Challenges Ahead", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 8. No. 3 (December, 2006): 279-298.

¹⁹ See Hakan Yılmaz, "Turkish Populism and the Anti-EU Rhetoric", Paper presented to the Conference on "Perceptions and Misperceptions in the EU and Turkey: Stumbling Blocks on the Road to Accession" organized by the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) and Turkey Institute, Leiden, Holland (June 2008). The nation-

one can identify common elements. In both cases, the politics of fear and more specifically the fear of fragmentation appears to be a central element. In the European context, these fears are based on the expectation that Turkish accession will help to fragment Europe and jeopardize its further deepening and governability. The negative outcomes are expected to manifest themselves both in the cultural realm- by undermining the cultural homogeneity of Europe- as well as in the economic realm- with massive migration from Turkey resulting in a loss of jobs on a grand scale on the part of the established European citizens. The second common element is that a basic source of support for both elements which we can term the broad coalition for special partnership is the losers of the globalization process.

Crucial developments in the internal politics of Europe over the past few years have undoubtedly made a deep negative impact on Turkish membership prospects. One of the striking developments in Europe in recent years has been the development of right-wing populism based on the fears of immigration and loss of jobs fuelled by the rise of Islam phobia.²⁰ The events of 9/11 have left a deep imprint on the European landscape and have clearly helped to fuel anti-Muslim sentiments at the level of the general public. The clear swing of the pendulum towards right of center, Christian Democratic parties in recent years has also generate an unattractive environment for Turkish membership and has helped to push supporters of Turkish membership both at home and abroad in a heavily defensive position. What is important to recognize, however, is that the "Turkey question" is a reflection of deeper uncertainties and fears in European societies and the problems that they are facing in terms of adopting themselves to the pressures of globalization.

IV. Turkish Political Parties and the Europeanization Process: A Comparative Perspective

Four major political parties have been represented in the Turkish Parliament following the general elections of July 2007.²¹ It would be interesting to compare the commitment of these parties to the EU membership process in the post-1999 era. The post-1999 era is divided into two sub-periods. The first period corresponds to the golden age of Europeanization in Turkey from the announcement of Turkey's candidate status to the decision to open negotiations. The post-2004 period, in turn, corresponds to the thorny period which corresponds to the initiation and the partial suspension of accession negotiations. A number of striking insights can be generated from an examination of Table 1. During the early period, there is clearly broad support for EU mem-

alist mind-set in Turkey has been heavily influenced by the "*Sevres Syndrome*," a sense of being encircled by enemies attempting the destruction of the Turkish state. See Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey and the Mediterranean," in Stelios Stavridis, Theodore Couloumbis, and Thanos Veremis (eds), *The Foreign Policies of the European Union's Mediterranean States and Applicant Countries in the 1990s* (London: MacMillan Press, 1999: 280-281. This kind of thinking clearly characterizes the mind-set of key element of the powerful Euro-skeptic bloc in Turkey which would include the two major opposition parties of the current era, the Republican People's Party (the CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (the MHP) as well the major components of the Turkish state bureaucracy including the military.

¹⁹ For a good analysis with special reference to the Dutch context, see Rene Cuperus, "Europe's Revolt of Populism and the Turkish Question". Paper presented to the Conference on "Perceptions and Misperceptions in the EU and Turkey: Stumbling Blocks on the Road to Accession" organized by the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) and Turkey Institute, Leiden, Holland (June 2008).

²⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the Turkish party system, see Sabri Sayari, ed. *New Directions in Turkish Politics*, special issue of *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 2007)

bership and the associated reform process. The governing party, the AKP and the “Kurdish Nationalists” represented by the Democratic Society Party (the DTP) in Parliament after 2007 (the DTP) are the two key elements in Turkish politics which appear to be strongly committed to EU membership.²² The principal opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (the CHP) was also broadly supportive of the EU membership process, in spite of its reservations concerning the conditions attached to EU membership in terms of their potentially negative impact on national unity and the secular character of the Turkish state. It is only the “ultra-nationalist”, the Nationalist Action Party (the MHP) which could be as Euro-skeptic in its orientation. Even in the case of the MHP, the opposition is not to the idea of EU membership *per se*, but with the conditions attached to membership, their concerns to a large extent overlapping with those of the CHP. In retrospect, the common denominator of the “Muslim democrats” and the “Kurdish nationalists” is that the EU process expanded the space for them to advance their identity claims, religious freedoms in the former case and cultural rights followed by steps towards devolution and regional autonomy in the latter case.

| Political Party | 1999-2004 | Post-2004 |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| AKP | Strong Support | Qualified Support |
| CHP | Qualified Support | Euro-Skeptic |
| MHP | Euro-Skeptic | Euro-Skeptic |
| DTP | Strong Support | Strong Support |

Table 1: Turkish Political Parties and the Degree of Support for EU Membership

In the post-2004 context, however, the situation seems to have changed markedly. The only element of the Turkish party system which represents an element of continuity with the previous sub-period is “Kurdish nationalists”. The AKP appears to have lost its early enthusiasm for

²² Kurdish nationalists were represented by a party under a different name, DEHAP, in the general elections of November 2002.

the EU membership process. Equally striking is the fact that the CHP, a supposedly Western-oriented, left of center party has become progressively Euro-skeptic in its orientation, effectively converging to the position of the ultra-nationalist, the MHP, especially in relation concerns relating to loss of national sovereignty and the threat of national fragmentation. Clearly, part of the explanation lies in the signals originating from the EU and the associated decline in public support for EU membership in Turkey. However, a deeper explanation lies in the contest for hegemony in the domestic political arena.

In the case of the AKP, the party has progressively moved to the very "center" of the Turkish political process with a steady expansion of its electoral base over the course of the 2002-2007 period. Religious conservatives or Muslim democrats are no longer in the periphery of Turkish politics, but are in contesting for a share of the "centre" with key elements of the secular elites. Indeed, by 2009, the pendulum appears to be increasingly swinging in the direction of Muslim democrats as the hegemonic position of the secular establishment is progressively challenged by the "Ergenekon trials" involving allegations of an intended military coup to check the rise of religious conservatism and perceived threats to national unity.²³ Arguably, the stronger position of the AKP in Turkish domestic politics renders the EU process less urgent in terms of providing a necessary safeguard against the secular establishment. In contrast, the CHP leadership has increasingly viewed the EU process as helping to shift the balance of forces in Turkish politics in the direction of strengthening religious conservatives as well as Kurdish nationalists. This, in turn, may explain their growing Euro-skepticism in the post-2004 era.

Looking to the future, for the EU process to revitalize itself in Turkey, at least one of the major political parties in Turkey has to regain its commitment and take over the ownership of the EU integration and reform process. The position of the principal opposition party, the CHP, is of crucial importance in this context. The Turkish party system in recent years has been characterized by the conspicuous absence of a European style social democratic party. The CHP, although a member of the Socialist International, has been characterized by its strong and defensive nationalism as well as a narrow and authoritarian understanding of secularism.²⁴ It is conceivable however that the party may experience a transformation in the coming years as secular groups with Western oriented segments of Turkish society increasingly view the EU membership process as a means of balancing the drift towards religious conservatism and maintaining a genuinely secular and pluralistic society.²⁵

V. The Future Course of the Europeanization Process: Grounds for Optimism

The prospects for Turkey's ambitions for full EU membership do not appear to be very bright in the current conjuncture. Perhaps what appears to be most worrisome, on the top of the dramatic decline in public support for EU membership in Turkey, is the loss of enthusiasm on the part

²³ For an informative analysis, see H. Akın Ünver, "Turkey's 'Deep-State' and the Ergenekon Conundrum", *The Middle East Institute Policy Brief*, No. 23 (Washington DC.: The Middle East Institute, April 2009).

²⁴ On the nature of the CHP in recent years, see Sinan Ciddi, "The Republican People's Party and the 2007 General Elections: Politics of Perpetual Decline?" *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No.3 (September 2008): 437-456.

²⁵ For detailed documentation on rising conservatism in Turkey in recent years, see Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2009).

of the liberal, pro-European elites for the EU membership process. With key chapters for negotiation already suspended, the government in power is likely to pursue a loose Europeanization agenda of gradual reforms falling considerably short of deep commitment for full-membership. The pursuit of a loose Europeanization agenda, needless to say, is perfectly consistent with the vision of a privileged partnership. There is no doubt that the EU membership process for Turkey has lost much of its early momentum. Yet, there are important developments which makes one more optimistic about the future. First, the fact that the Constitutional Court case against the governing party did not end up with a decision to ban the party constitutes, from a short-term perspective, a favorable development. The outcome of the court case against the AKP could have had very serious destabilizing consequences in terms of its impact on domestic politics, the economy as well as the future trajectory of Turkey-EU relations. In the European circles, the decision to close the party could have been interpreted as a major break-down of the democratic order in Turkey with the natural consequence of suspending the negotiation process altogether. It would then have been very difficult to revitalize the negotiation process. The AKP is still the only the major political party in Turkey which at least provides qualified support for the EU membership process and its role in re-vitalizing the EU process, at least in the short-term, should not be underestimated.

The appointment of a new chief negotiator with the EU and the opening of a new Kurdish television channel under the auspices of the state broadcasting agency (the TRT), representing an important step in the direction of recognizing the language and cultural rights of its citizens of Kurdish origin., in January 2009 may be interpreted as possible signs of a renewed impetus on the part of the AKP government to revitalize its Europeanization drive. Indeed in the period leading up to the local elections of March 2009 and even more strikingly in the aftermath of the elections where the party has lost some of its electoral support, we observe a marked increase in the AKP government's efforts to advance the democratization agenda, notably in relation to expanding the cultural rights of citizens of Kurdish origin. The government has come up with an ambitious agenda to resolve Turkey's long-standing "Kurdish Question" during the summer of 2009. Moreover, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the architect of Turkish foreign policy in recent years and the newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs has emphasized that EU membership ought to be the top priority of Turkish foreign policy and has already taken steps to conduct an active dialogue countries such as Spain, Britain and Sweden, which are particularly favorable to Turkish membership.

Second, the change of government in Southern Cyprus and the re-initiation of formal negotiations for the re-unification of the island have helped to create a new climate of hope in the direction of reaching an equitable settlement to the Cyprus dispute. Although it is early to predict the final outcome, there is at least the possibility that the outcome could be positive which would then help to eliminate a major hurdle on the path of Turkey's progress towards EU accession. Third, the election of Barack Obama as the new president of the United States may also help to inject a new lease of life to Turkey-US relations. The United States has always been a critical actor in Turkish foreign policy calculations and has played a critical role in Turkey's quest for EU membership. The new US administration with its emphasis on multilateralism and engagement with key global and regional actors is likely to generate a much more favorable environment both in terms of strengthening the Trans-Atlantic Alliance and bilateral relations be-

tween Turkey and the United States. These developments, in turn, are likely to create a more congenial environment for an internationally acceptable solution to the Cyprus issue and contribute to a possible revival in Turkey's push for EU membership.

The European integration process and Turkey-EU relations are both long-term historical processes. In spite of serious ups and downs and periodic crises on the way, the long-term trend has clearly been in the direction of deepening of the integration process itself as well as the deepening of Turkey's integration process to the EU. Long-term historical processes are difficult to reverse. Reversal becomes particularly difficult once the critical decision is taken to initiate negotiations on the part of the EU with a candidate country. Indeed, there is no country which has reached the point of negotiations and then failed to qualify as a full-member. Having set the target of full-membership as a long-term goal and having invested so much in one another, ending up with anything less than full integration will represent a sense of failure and a certain loss of credibility on both sides. Hence, a sense of historical perspective tends to inject an air of optimism regarding the future course of the integration process as well as the possibility of Turkish accession to the EU as a full member.

The current constitutional crisis in the EU may ironically create an opportunity space for Turkey. Clearly what is at stake in the constitutional debate is the future direction of the European project. If the outcome of the constitutional crisis is the development of the EU more in the direction of what Jan Zielonka calls a loosely structured "medieval empire", which is broadly consistent with the British vision rather than the kind of deep integration project favored by the French, this will naturally embody very significant implications for the future place of Turkey in the European context.²⁶ If the future path of the EU involves a British style integration process of a relatively loose, intergovernmental Europe with relatively flexible boundaries which allows significant scope for national autonomy, the prospects for Turkish accession will be considerably improved. In contrast, if the dominant style of integration is based on the French project of deep integration- the idea of Europe as a "place" with fixed boundaries as opposed to a flexible "space"-the natural inclination will be to include Turkey as an "important outsider" rather than a "natural insider" in a special partnership style arrangement. Our interpretation of the current constitutional impasse in Europe having reached a peak with the negative vote in Irish referendum of June 2008 is that the dominant tendency in the foreseeable future is likely to be the first scenario of flexible integration which clearly constitutes a development in Turkey's favor.

In the current conjuncture, the EU clearly suffers from an enlargement fatigue having absorbed ten new members in 2004 and two additional members in 2007. Furthermore, this was the most complex wave of enlargement to date, involving the incorporation of countries with deep legacies of communist regimes. Again, a sense of historical perspective suggests, however, that the current enlargement fatigue may not necessarily be a permanent phenomenon. The EU within the course of the next five to ten years may again find itself in the midst of a new wave of enlargement which would involve expansion towards the Balkans and Eastern Europe at the same time. There is already strong support for further enlargement of the EU towards the East among the new member states. The Poles, for example, have emerged as vocal supporters of the

²⁶ Zielonka, Jan, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

membership of Ukraine. In a world of Russian assertionism and the solid base of support for further enlargement which exists among the new member states for further eastern enlargement, both for cultural and security reasons, it is highly probable that a new wave of enlargement will take place in the medium-term and once this process gathers momentum, it might be difficult to exclude Turkey from this on-going dynamic.

A favorable external environment for enlargement is quite crucial for revitalizing Turkish membership aspirations in the medium term. A favorable external context *per se*, however, is insufficient and needs to be accompanied by a parallel process of the emergence of a strong political movement at home which is deeply committed to the reform process and to membership. Clearly, a crucial element in this context will be the position of the "secular", Western-oriented middle classes in Turkey. If these groups in Turkish society feel that full membership of the EU is a necessary anchor for preventing their marginalization in an increasingly religious and conservative Turkish society, they may create the impetus for the emergence of such a political movement which, in turn, may capitalize on a possible wave of further enlargement to successfully press for Turkey's inclusion in the EU as a full-member. Stated somewhat differently, the push for EU membership may become the instrument for middle-classes with Western orientations and life-styles in Turkey to re-gain their position in the very "center" of Turkish domestic politics, highlighting once again our central point that domestic political contests are central to an understanding of the underlying motivations for EU membership in the Turkish context. This, however, would require a major transformation of the current attitudes and outlook of "secular middle classes" in Turkey, large segments of which have not been supportive of the Europeanization and democratization drive in recent years. It would also require a major transformation, in the position of the principal political actor which represents such groups in Turkish society, the CHP, whose Euro-skepticism and opposition to democratization reforms in recent years has been a major handicap on the path of Turkey's drive to EU membership.

What can be done in the short-run to reactive Turkey's drive for EU membership considering its critical importance from the point of view of economic success, democratic deepening and consolidation of foreign policy based on the use of soft power? Certainly, an approach based on promoting mutual co-operation without a firm membership signal is not likely to be very productive. This will tend to accelerate the already existing trend towards a special partnership arrangement. There is clearly a need to re-dramatize the process and provide it with a new momentum by highlighting the fact that the main benefits of membership follow once membership is actually achieved. Hence, the emphasis ought to be on accelerating the process rather than opting for a slow motion scenario with an uncertain future. The most practical option would be for civil society groups and the EU institutions to put more pressure on the current AKP government to revitalize the reform process. Pro-active steps by the Turkish government would play a critical role and Turkey itself could demonstrate its renewed commitment by developing a concrete timetable for membership going so far as to set a new target date for membership on a unilateral basis. At the same time, however, the EU could strengthen the hands of the Turkish government by taking a more active interest in resolving the Cyprus dispute which constitutes the most immediate and concrete obstacle on the path of Turkish membership. The current mood in Cyprus makes one more optimistic than ever before that the negotiation process may end up with a successful settlement in the island. Key European states and the EU institutions through active

engagement could play a critical role in helping to resolve the Cyprus dispute which would inevitably inject a new wave of optimism concerning the future of Turkey-EU relations.

VI. Concluding Remarks

What we increasingly observe in the current era is the emergence of an implicit broad and mutually reinforcing coalition for "special partnership", which seems to be deeply rooted, but for rather different reasons, both in the European and Turkish contexts. This constitutes a significant danger from the point of Turkey's full-membership prospects. The proponents of Turkish membership both at home and abroad appear to be increasingly less vocal and enthusiastic compared to their Turko-skeptic and Euro-skeptic counterparts. The retreat to "loose Europeanization" certainly does not signify the abandonment of the Europeanization project altogether. What it means, however, is that the EU will no longer be at the center-stage of Turkey's external relations or foreign policy efforts. This, in turn, is likely to have dramatic repercussions for the depth and intensity of the democratization process in Turkey especially in key areas such as a complete reordering of military-civilian relations, an extension of minority rights and a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem, as well as counteracting the deeply embedded problem of gender inequality. There exist key elements within the Turkish state and Turkish society, which would be quite content with the loose Europeanization solution given the perceived threats posed by a combination of deep Europeanization and deep democratization for national sovereignty and political stability. The fears of deep Europeanization are not simply confined to the defensive nationalist camp. There also exists considerable conservatism even in the much more globally oriented AKP circles, when it comes to deep democratization agenda, as it is clearly evident from the resistance to the repealing of the article 301 of the penal code.

A final question to raise in this context is whether the drift towards loose Europeanization is likely to be reversed. The likelihood of a major reversal in the immediate term appears to be rather low. From a longer-term perspective, two possibly mutually reinforcing developments may facilitate a renewed impetus to the deep Europeanization agenda. The first element of such a scenario would involve a new enlargement wave in Europe, which would incorporate the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Turkey as a country, which has already reached the point of accession negotiations will not be immune to such a process. The second element of such a scenario would involve the emergence of a strong counter-movement from the more liberal and Western-oriented segments of the Turkish society, who will place Europeanization and reform firmly on its political agenda.

The onset of the global economic crisis has helped to inject a further element of uncertainty to the already uncertain trajectory of Turkey-EU relations and future direction of Turkish foreign policy in general. The Turkish economy has been experiencing a severe down-turn of economic performance in the later part of 2008. There is growing pessimism concerning the performance of the economy and recent figures indicating falling growth, rising unemployment and declining inflows of foreign direct investment point towards a new era of relative stagnation, making a sharp contrast with the economic boom of the post-2001 period. It is conceivable that the sharp decline in economic performance will help to reactivate the EU anchor and will create a major incentive in the direction of strengthening its relations with the European Union and the

United States. The fact that Turkey is currently in the process of signing a new stand-by agreement clearly pinpoints in that direction. It is also likely that the weakening of economic performance will reduce the scope for the assertive and multi-dimensional foreign policy strategy with no firm trans-Atlantic or EU axis observed during the second phase of the AKP government, forcing Turkey to align its policies much more closely with the Western alliance in the process.²⁷

²⁷ A recent analysis by Ian Lesser points in this direction. Lesser suggests that the neighboring countries, finding themselves in an environment of significant economic stress, will also be much less receptive to the kind of soft-power approach advocated by Turkey in recent years. See Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey and the Global Economic Crisis", *German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief on Turkey* (Fall 2008) available at [http:// www.gmfus.org/publications/article.cfm?id=504](http://www.gmfus.org/publications/article.cfm?id=504).



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