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► **To cite this version:**

Sylvie Gangloff. Turkey's Accession to the EU: The Flexible Reality Underlying the Debate. European and Turkish Voices in Favour and Against Turkish Accession to the EU., 2008. hal-03134694

**HAL Id: hal-03134694**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03134694>**

Submitted on 8 Feb 2021

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**Turkey’s Accession to the EU:  
The Flexible Reality Underlying the Debate**

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*in Timmerman C., Rohtus D., Mels S. (eds.), European and Turkish Voices in Favour and Against Turkish Accession to the EU, Bruxelles/Berne/Berlin/New-York/Oxford/Wien, PIE Peter Lang, « European Policy » (38), 2008, pp. 33-44. ISBN 978-90-5201-428-9*

The issue of Turkey’s membership of the European Union is not new and indeed has already been widely debated. The Turkish economy (i.e. its inflation, the weight of its agricultural sector, its high unemployment...) has been scrutinized; the demography of the country and the related aspect of migration or, to be more precise, the *fear* of a massive Turkish migration wave *flooding* Europe, have been critically analysed from both sides; the apparent contradictions in respect of democracy, human rights and the Kurdish question have been pointed out, etc.

Rather than concentrate on facts – which can after all be presented and argued in both directions, either against or in favour of Turkey’s membership – we argue that the *perception* of the relevant issues (be they political, economic or civil society related) outweighs the underlying reality, as the latter is invariably flexible. It is instructive, in this respect, to consider the kind of responses and discourses Turkish leaders and intellectuals have used against the arguments propounded by Europeans against Turkey’s membership.

***Turkish Discourses and Rhetoric***

Various criticisms and arguments have been put forward to oppose Turkish membership. Against these arguments, Turkish officials and columnists have developed an *a contrario* approach whereby they acknowledge that Turkey’s

economy is not particularly efficient, while at the same time arguing that Turkish integration into the EU will improve its economic performance; they concede that the human rights situation is questionable, but add that when Turkey becomes a member of the EU, political stability will ensue and European standards will prevent any further human rights violations, etc.

The latter view is, in fact, shared by most observers: Turkey's membership, it is argued, will reinforce the country's political stability and ensure the implementation of democracy. It is on the strength of this reasoning, for example, that Turkish leftist intellectuals – who in the 1970s still opposed Turkish membership of what they regarded to be a capitalist platform – changed their minds after a coup in the 1980s. The prospect of EU membership and specifically the requirement of meeting the Copenhagen criteria have already impacted considerably and significantly on the implementation of democracy in Turkey (human rights, the justice system, public policies...). Nonetheless, it should be noted that, as far as amendments, administrative change and reform of the political and juridical system are concerned, there are two general stances in Turkey which remain problematic. First, there is a kind of reluctance among the intermediary class of state employees to implement the Copenhagen criteria. They are simply afraid, it seems, to have to relinquish the benefits they forged for themselves under the old system, and to lose the power or competency to interfere in local and national policies. Second, the Turkish people, including some of the political elite and intellectuals, would appear not to have fully understood that EU membership implies giving up certain aspects of one's national sovereignty.

But apart from these two sensitivities or reluctances, there is no doubt among the Turks that, if Turkey becomes an EU member, the country's political system and stability will improve. However, the question remains whether this, a valid argument as far as the Turkish perspective is concerned, also works from the European viewpoint. It is, after all, not the purpose of the European Union to integrate countries with a view to enhancing democracy in the world. The European identity

or the European “ideal” encompasses respect for certain rights and incorporates the general notion of democracy (as well as the political and administrative frame that it implies). However, even if supporting democracy is an expressly stated role of the European Union, it is surely not its role or purpose to integrate a country *in order* to democratize it.

A second set of arguments, with some persuasive examples, that Turkish leaders have used in response to European criticism may be described as the comparative discourse. It involves questions such as: Why should the multiple criticism of Turkey’s human rights record be an obstacle to EU membership while Slovakia, at the time of its accession to the EU, was found wanting in the same area (and, for that matter, could be strongly criticized and denounced as a country with dictatorial tendencies)? Why has the EU asked Turkey to remove any mention of religion on the national identity papers while in the case of Greece this is not deemed a problem? Why raise the issue of persecution in Turkey and not that of the persecution of Turks in Western Thrace or by the Slavo-Macedonians in Greece? And so on. The EU, so it is argued, should approach all candidate member states in the same way and apply the same frame of analysis for all.

Third, the Turkish people and intelligentsia are well aware that the reluctance of the Europeans *vis-à-vis* Turkish EU membership stems largely from the country’s rather tarnished image: Turkey is often presented, and universally perceived, as an oriental country, beyond the borders of Europe, and foreign in many aspects to the European way of life or the European spirit.

In response, Turkish leaders and the country’s elite have put forward a much more convincing rhetoric, which we may refer to as the bridging discourse: Turkey is presented as a natural crossroads, a link between East and West, a bridge connecting the Occident and the Orient. And this role is epitomized by the location of Istanbul. Hence Turkey, a country inhabited by Muslims but secular and

westernized, is key to NATO’s defence structure because it occupies a strategic intermediary position, both geographically and culturally.

As far as its geographic position is concerned, the Turks argue that the straits separating east from west are a link rather than a border, as is apparent from the hundreds and thousands of boats that make the crossing daily. Anatolia, it is argued, is inseparable from its Balkan peninsula and history shows just how much this couple (Balkans-Anatolia) is an integral part of Europe. After all, was the Ottoman Empire not known as the “sick man of Europe”? Here, a discrepancy in terms of historical perception comes to the fore: most Europeans have not been taught about the Ottoman role in European history. In fact, West Europeans in particular seem to know hardly anything about the Ottoman Empire, except that the Turks once tried to invade Europe. In Turkey, by contrast, the emphasis in history lessons is on the Balkan section of the Empire, so that the Turks definitely perceive themselves – rightly or wrongly – as more “connected” with the Balkans and Europe than with the “foreign” Middle East.

Ultimately, though, the bridging rhetoric is also a double-edged sword. By emphasising Turkey’s role as a bridge between two worlds, this discourse at once concedes that the country belongs to both worlds. Hence, when Turkey presents itself as a secular country inhabited by Muslims that can play a useful role as an intermediary between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world, it runs the risk of being viewed as a Muslim country by the West and as a Western country with a thin layer of Islamic varnish by the Muslim world.

Turkey has, however, elevated its role as a bridge to the status of dogma, as a central component of its approach towards the West in general. It is because of its supposed key role between East and West that Turkey has been able to present itself as strategically important, and this perception provided the basis for its image as a regional power during the Cold War.

***The Strategic Level: Turkey's Role in the Defence of Europe at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

The West's defence policy is of course based on perceived threats. As far Europe is concerned, these threats manifest themselves first and foremost in the Mediterranean, where a confrontation is taking place between North and South, and where economic, political and cultural components are mixed; second, they are perceived in the Middle East, not only because it supplies gas to Europe, but also because it is a politically unstable region characterized by armed conflict. The Caucasus, for its part, has no direct impact on European defence strategy, though it does hold gas supplies and impacts on Russian policy, which in turn has great strategic bearing for Europe. In this respect, Turkey's role as the sole guardian of the straits *still* gives it a tangible strategic significance, though not as central as during the Cold War years. Finally, closer to the European heartland, the Balkans are still undergoing a political reconstruction process, in which Europe is directly militarily involved. In respect of all these threats, except in the Western Mediterranean, Turkey is strategically important.

But while holding a strategic position is a valuable asset, defending it can be a tricky proposition. Even though European diplomats are well aware of the advantages of having such a strategic ally, they might not be so keen to face the various implications of getting more profoundly involved in such an instable area. Thus far, although they claim the opposite, they have left it mainly to the United States to deal with the Middle East. And while most European diplomats disapprove of the American approach, they are anxious for their own countries not to get too involved because they lack not only the military means to act effectively, but also, and perhaps more importantly, any semblance of common ground on the Middle East. As the conflict in the Balkans has already shown, Europe does not have a common foreign policy. Therefore, having to deal with the Middle East or the

Caucasus may exacerbate conflicting views within the EU. There is no common vision on how to deal with the Iranian or the Palestinian issue and opinions on the ongoing war in Iraq are also radically divergent. In fact, the latter conflict may have enhanced the view that Turkey is a Middle Eastern country after all, for why would the European Union want to share a border with Iraq?

Finally, in respect of what the European Union and the Western world in general now perceive to be the major threats – first of all, terrorism (and Muslim terrorism in particular), but also trafficking of nuclear components, human trafficking, drugs, etc – Turkey may be an important ally, but it is certainly not a major one. Clearly, then, the strategic argument – once the only argument that could persuade the Europeans to consider Turkish EU membership – is a fragile one. And seen from the perspective of creating a European pillar within NATO, the Europeans might be tempted to leave the Americans to deal with the “Turkish issue”.

The latter argument brings us to another political apprehension on the European side: the fear for allowing into the EU an American Trojan Horse; a country, in other words, that is more faithful to the US than to Europe. It is well-documented that France, which regards the EU as a counterweight to the United States, once opposed the United Kingdom’s membership for this very reason. Clearly, then, the idea of integrating an American ally into the EU raises some suspicions. Seen in this light, the open support extended by the United States to Turkey’s EU candidacy may not have furthered the country’s accession cause.

Of course, whether or not Turkey is indeed a faithful ally to the Americans is a matter of debate (notably since the Turkish Parliament’s refusal to authorize the transit of American troops to Iraq). Moreover, if Turkey does become a member of the European Union, this does not necessarily mean that it will act in the interest of the US in its dealings with the other Member States. Third, the perception of the EU as a counterweight to the global might of the United States is not necessarily a

common view within the EU. Again, though, the reality underlying the debate is quite flexible.

### ***Cultural Obstacles, Popular Reluctance and Political Isolationism***

The deeper obstacle to Turkey's membership lies somewhere else though: it is situated in the cultural or religious sphere. There can be little doubt that the integration of a Muslim country, while not always expressly raised as a problem, still inspires deep reluctance within the EU. Few European political leaders will use this not-so-politically correct argument in public, but the perception that we, Europeans, might be integrating into our own structure a completely different culture, a backward country, is a deeply rooted fear, not just among ordinary Europeans, but also among political leaders and intellectuals.

The deeply entrenched perception that in dealing with the Turks we are dealing with a barbarian people is commonly substantiated with historical arguments: the Vienna siege, the Oriental and backward Ottoman Empire that experienced no Renaissance or Enlightenment. It is an image coupled with that of the Muslims and Muslim culture, by its very nature, being alien to European culture. Elements that are frequently referred to in this context are Islam's supposed intolerance, the persecution of women and polygamy. All of this reinforces the notion that this religion is intolerant, creates fanatics and massive despotism. Moreover, a number of events over the past two years have given substance to this argument. Examples that come to mind are the veil debate in Turkey and the new law on female adultery proposed by the AKP government. These were sensational stories which the European media were quick to cover. However, very little was said on the debate the two topics generated in Turkey itself (the adultery law, for example, was met with widespread popular opposition). No real explanation was provided in Europe of what Islam means in Turkey. Television news seems always to paint the same



picture of the country: a dual image of a supposedly modern girl in short-sleeved clothes versus a veiled woman.

Again, it is almost impossible to arrive at an objective viewpoint of Turkey’s membership, as such perceptions inevitably underlie one’s opinion.

As we have previously mentioned, the purpose of the EU is not to integrate a country in order to democratize it. On the other hand, though, it is clear that Turkey has already made great strides in implementing EU criteria in relation to the development of democracy in general (be it at Europe’s request or otherwise). But discussing the state of democracy in Turkey is like debating whether the bottle is half empty or half full. Again, it is hard to attain a completely objective perspective on issues such as democracy and human rights: one can see what is being done and the progress that is being made; one can underline that there is a free press, that people can vote freely, and that there is a multiparty system. Or one can choose to emphasize that certain leftist leaders are still unfairly imprisoned; that any journalist, writer or editor who dares to mention the Armenian genocide risks prosecution; that there is still a major repression going on in the southeast of the country, etc.

The profound popular reluctance towards Turkish EU membership is also linked to a deep-rooted and somewhat confused anxiety about Europe being swept 70 million Muslims. People are fearful of the prospect of swarms of Turks invading their towns and reproducing in the suburbs until the indigenous population is eventually overrun by a galloping Turkish demography. Public opinion, intellectuals and political leaders seem to share this fear, which is sometimes expressed openly and sometimes merely implied. “Do we want the river of Islam to enter the riverbed of secularism?”, former French Prime Minister Raffarin asked when talking about Turkey’s membership in September 2004. Some have gone even further: Turkey’s membership would spell “the end of the European Union” according to Giscard

d’Estaing, speaking as the head of the European Convention in November 2002, just a month before the Copenhagen summit. So are we about to tie the knot to hang ourselves?

This fear obviously comprises some religious issues. When the Central European countries integrated into the EU in 2004, there was no hysterical apprehension or fear that we might be turning into a Slav union, even though 83 million people, most of them Slavs, were joining the EU in a single move. It is also a fear that is fed by parties running election campaigns that are increasingly dominated by the theme of insecurity in the suburbs; immigration, it is argued, generates criminality and most of the immigrants in France, Germany, Belgium and England happen to be Muslims. These – often successful – electoral campaigns hinging on the themes of insecurity and violence are ultimately harmful to Turkey. When the association agreement with Turkey was signed in 1963, Turkey’s membership was formerly accepted as a goal. Clearly Turkey was already inhabited by Muslims, yet this did not seem to bother anyone at the time. Subsequently, economic crisis struck and unemployment soared, and scapegoats needed to be found. Western European countries, it would appear, like to think of themselves as citadels, threatened by foreign elements, including intruders who have already penetrated onto their own soil.

Nobody is denying that integrating a county with a population of 70 million people is a considerable challenge, but again, compare with the 83 million from Central Europe who joined. As for the migration issue, i.e. the threat of a flood of Turks inundating the other Member States of the Union, serene analyses tend to converge on a minimal migration event. First, it should be pointed out that “they are already here”. Most of the people intending to migrate to Europe have already done so. Of course, there is still a potential for migration, but, as the case of Portugal illustrated, when the possibility of migration presents itself, most people tend to stay

in their own country, to keep their future options open, and to circulate rather than to settle. Above all, with EU membership, the economic situation is expected to improve, and therefore there is no longer a need to emigrate for economic purposes. Second, in the same way as there is no invasion scheme, there is no settling goal. Migration today, particularly with open borders, is about circulation rather than transplantation: people are coming and going all the time.

### ***Alleviating the Antagonism***

Finally, one must consider whether Turkey should not be integrated into Europe for the sake of Europe rather than that of Turkey: in order to fight its own political isolationism, its fear of Muslims and the ongoing process of antagonism process.

Religions are indeed a component of the European cultural identity. However, we know from *facts* – particularly such political facts as wars, crises and tensions – that religion is a factor of distrust rather than identification; that religion is more commonly used, invoked, instrumentalized to move *against* people than to move *with* them. Consider the example of the conflicts in the Balkans: When the Serbs fought the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, did orthodox Romania or orthodox Bulgaria come to the Serbs’ aid? When the Muslims fought the Serbs, did the Muslim Albanians join their ranks? When the Albanians in Kosovo fought the Serbs, did the Bosnians intervene (after all, both of these peoples were fighting a common Serbian enemy)? And yet in all these cases, religion was invoked as a defining factor. Finally, it is worth pointing out that the attacks of 9/11 have, of course, strongly reinforced the antagonism that may exist in the Western, i.e. Christian, world against Muslims.

Positions tend to be straining on both sides. In Turkey, a significant discontent is spreading with the constant new demands from the EU, and with what is perceived as the specific and unfair handling of Turkey’s candidacy (specifically

when compared with the treatment of the new Eastern European Member States). In sum, Turkey’s leaders and people feel they are being mistreated by the EU and, as a result, nationalism and even ultra-nationalism would appear to be spreading (although this threat should certainly not be used as an argument to push for Turkish membership). Moreover, what is at stake for Turkey is not simply the economic benefit of EU membership. Turkey has always, since the very founding of the republic, opted for a westernization process and is today claiming a European identity: the Turks perceive themselves as westernized. Besides the economic and financial advantages they expect from EU accession, they are looking for the concretization of the country’s Kemalist westernization process at the institutional level, as well as in terms of image and foreign “acknowledgement”. If they find themselves rejected by the very political and cultural entity that has, to an extent, served as their model, and if their westernization process is not properly acknowledged, their entire identity will have been called into questioned.

On the EU side, Europe’s leaders and peoples are naturally sensitive to the current climate of overwhelming fear of Muslims and Islamists, and the ongoing demonization of Islam. This demonization is unfounded – we have long known that what matters in international politics is perception rather than reality – yet it gives rise to a crucial threat: a deep, basic, conjectural but long-term antagonism with what is perceived to be Muslim culture, with Muslims in general. The EU (and so-called western civilization as a whole) has nothing to gain from creating, reinforcing, feeding such antagonism. The rejection of Turkey’s candidacy will only underscore the segregation between the Western – i.e. Christian – countries and the Muslim world.

Turkey’s candidacy has already initiated a new debate within Europe on the borders of the EU and on the cultural features of the Union. European leaders also seem to be looking at themselves whenever Turkey’s membership is discussed, and

whatever arguments can be put forward in favour or against Turkish accession, there would appear to be a realization that its membership might at least contribute to a better understanding of Islam or so-called Islamic culture, and therefore to a relativization of existing cultural and political antagonisms.