

Euroscepticism in Turkey: European Ambiguity Fuels Nationalism

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It appears self-evident in Turkey that the European Union is the final destination that the country is moving towards. Membership of the EU is seen as the last phase of Turkey's slow but relentless journey towards the West, originally a geographical phenomenon from the time of the historical migration of the Turkish peoples, later acquiring a political dimension under the influence of Mustapha Kemal Atatürk. Joining the Union would thus be the last step in the process of modernizing Turkey. However, this apparent consensus patches over the profound underlying ambiguities that characterize Turkey's complex relationship with the West. In the same way that Turkey's application obliges European countries to examine their own conception of the EU, it also goes to the heart of the Turkish identity and requires Turks to define themselves in terms of their relationship with others. Whilst on the one hand an idealized picture of Europe is given as the model to be followed, particularly when it comes to modernizing the country, the image of Europe as the historic enemy is also very much present. Today's nationalist circles constantly stress this image of an all-conquering Europe. Outside such circles, the EU is generally seen as a far-away place with a hesitant attitude to Turkish membership, a vision which is not necessarily incompatible with continuing enthusiasm towards it, but which tends to make this enthusiasm more qualified and complex.

The All-conquering EU: The Ultra-Nationalist Vision

Over and above the left/right cleavage or the moder-

nist/traditionalist opposition, nationalism, which transcends these differences, is one of the essential keys to understanding euroscepticism in Turkey.

Extreme right-wing nationalist opinion coincides to a great extent with the position of certain extreme left-wing or pro-Kemal groupings on the question of European integration. The former see in membership of the EU the risk of a loss of cultural identity and national sovereignty, leading to large-scale political dependence. The latter denounce the neo-colonialist or imperialist character of the Union. Invoking historical parallels, the Copenhagen criteria or the treaty of Maastricht are compared to the treaty of Sèvres (which was signed in 1920 by Turkey and the victorious powers of the First World War, formally recognizing the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire). In short, Turkey is seen as being subject to a permanent and continuing Western threat.

The MHP (nationalist action party), representing the ultra-nationalist extreme right wing, does not define itself as anti-European. It nevertheless made maximum use of its presence in the coalition government from 1999 to 2002 to block any attempted reforms which were required in order to harmonize with EU regulations. Despite having been swept from power and losing much of its presence in parliament, the party nevertheless regularly continues to show its ability to mobilize its supporters. Thus on October 2nd 2005, on the eve of the opening of the meeting of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers called to establish a framework for negotiations, tens of thousands of demonstrators, brought from all over Turkey in 750 coaches, were summoned by the party to Ankara. Under a banner reading, *"Neither European Union nor USA, but a fully independent and nationalist Turkey"*, the Party leader, D. Bachelier, called on the Prime Minister not to go to Luxembourg, telling him: *"the concessions you have made so far have plunged the country into darkness"*.

The TKP (Turkish communist party) and the Partisi (workers' party), both ultra-nationalist (ex-) Maoist parties, also protest regularly against the European Union. The TKP assembled hundreds of demonstrators on several occasions during 2005 to protest against "*Turkey in the EU and the EU in Turkey*"; "*Turkey must not become a colony inside the European Union (EU) any more than it is one today outside the EU*".

These ultra-nationalist groups combine their opposition to the EU with a refusal to recognize the Kurdish community, to seek a solution to the problem of Cyprus, or to undertake any discussion of the Armenian question.

Ultra-Nationalism in Action

Some seventy publishers, writers and journalists have been prosecuted for "*insulting the Turkish identity*" or various national institutions (an offence under Turkish law). The most famous among them, the novelist O. Pamuk, was charged after stating in a Swiss weekly newspaper that "*in this country (i.e., Turkey), 1 million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds were killed.*" Most of these court cases followed complaints lodged by the ultra-nationalist Association of the Union of Jurists (HBD), which has been able to find in the ranks of the country's legal institutions staunch defenders, in the name of Kemal Atatürk, of the "secular unity of the Republic". The Association also ensured the banning of a highly sensitive international university symposium on "*The Armenians during the decline of the Ottoman Empire*". After denouncing in their columns the court decision banning the holding of the conference, five journalists were charged with insulting and attempting to influence the course of justice. The symposium was finally able to be held, with the participation of scores of Turkish intellectuals, in September 2005. The participants at the conference were met by demonstrators throwing tomatoes and eggs and shouting: "*Traitors!*", "*The Armenian genocide is a lie!*", or "*The government must resign, this treason will not be left unpunished!*". A similar scene marked the opening of the trial of O. Pamuk on December 16th.

Despite their repercussions and the media coverage which they receive in Europe, the actions of these ultra-nationalist forces are not the last word on the relationship between Turkish society and the EU

EU: A Love-Hate Relationship

In Turkey, speeches and articles in favour of European integration are plentiful. This impression is reinforced by the existence of a very widely-based consensus ranging from the "moderate Islamist" government to economic circles (and particularly the world of big business), and including minority groups (Kurds, Alevis, etc.). Numerous opinion-polls have likewise shown that a very large majority of the population was in favour of membership (until recently, between 65% and 75%).

While being the longed-for destination on the horizon, the EU is nonetheless seen as a far-away and mistrustful land. Even before the emergence of the debate about the nature of the European identity, studies showed that the Turkish population considered Europe to be a Christian culture. Opinion-polls conducted from 2002 onwards likewise indicated that 45% of Turks were convinced that Europeans didn't want them.

The controversy over the Turkish application for membership in certain EU countries and the shilly-shallying of various governments went down very badly in Turkey. The Turks came to the conclusion that, over and above the technical aspects of the question, the countries and peoples of the European Union were in effect denying the European character of Turkey, despite the fact that this was at the heart of Kemal Atatürk's conception of the Turkish Republic.

The defeats in the referenda on the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands were interpreted as the result of the hostility shown by public opinion towards Turkish membership. The concept of a "privileged partnership" proposed by Angela Merkel and other European politicians; the decision of the French president Jacques Chirac (despite being himself in favour of Turkish membership) to make provision for a referendum on the question of whether Turkey should join the EU; Austria's wish to revise the compromise reached at the European Council meeting in Brussels in December 2004 on the question of opening negotiations with Ankara – all of these developments were considered as marks of mistrust towards Turkey and the Turks. Against a background of an intensification of the debate over the question of European identity in the different member states, Turkish public opinion was unable to identify the domestic political issues to which the different stances were partly linked – whether it be opposition to Gerhard Schroeder, an ardent supporter of the Turkish

cause (once she had been elected chancellor, Angela Merkel certainly went out of her way to reassure Turkey by declaring that she had no intention of hampering negotiations); the need on the French side to handle the crisis provoked by opponents of the European Constitution and the increasing influence of Nicolas Sarkozy; or Austrian pressure in favour of opening negotiations with Croatia.

The Turkish identity is undermined

The questioning of the Kemalist conception of a European Turkey, despite the fact that it is considered self-evident by a large majority of the population, has undermined the Turkish identity and complicated the relationship with the EU

By late 2005 it was possible to detect an erosion of the Turkish people's confidence in the European future of their country. A survey carried out in the 5 largest cities in Turkey after the opening of negotiations showed that only 55% of those questioned thought that Turkish membership of the EU would become a reality (compared with 61% the previous year). This pessimism reflects the "sense of unease of a country which sees both its political unity and its international projection as under serious threat" (BULUT, 2005).

The publishing success in Turkey of the novel *Metal Storm* is a particularly good example of this unease about national identity. First published in mid-December 2004, the book sold more than 400,000 copies in 2005 (or more than double the sales of *The Da Vinci Code*, which has become very popular in Turkey). A work of geo-political fiction, it describes how the Turks fight a desperate battle to repel the invading forces of the USA, the empire of evil. "A caricature representing the fears and tensions that have been felt by a large part of the population for many years, *Metal Storm* crystallizes the feeling of unease present throughout society. (...) Anti-Americanism is side by side with numerous other "antis": anti-semitism of course, but also anti-Europeanism, anti-Islamism, anti-intellectualism or "anti-Kurdism". All these incarnations of the enemy threatening the nation combine to renew and confirm the conspiracy syndromes which for the sociologist Serif Mardin constitute the basic philosophy of the history of contemporary Turkey" (*ibidem*).

The world of sport also reflects Turkey's ambiguous relationship with the EU. After the Galatasaray foot-

ball club's victory in the UEFA cup in 2000, the former President of the Republic S. Demirel proclaimed: "*Now we're Europeans!*" On the other hand, defeats are taken as rebuffs and are linked to European reluctance to accept Turkish entry into the EU (POLO, 2005). The violent incidents at the end of the Turkey-Switzerland match on November 16th 2005, and the knee-jerk reactions which followed underline the importance given to such events and the incomprehension existing between Turks and Europeans. Both media commentators and the general public in Turkey constantly explained the violence as a reaction to the offence committed against Turkey's national honour at the away match (when the national anthem had been whistled at by some supporters), whilst the (Swiss) president of FIFA, S. Blatter, went so far as to contemplate a possible exclusion of Turkey from the World Cup in 2010!

In Turkey, uneasiness about the country's identity reawakens the latent nationalism of a population that is nevertheless in favour of European integration.

A Society Prey to the Temptation of Nationalism

The procrastination of the EU member states concerning the future status of Turkey with regard to the Union provides the minority ultra-nationalist groups with an ideal platform from which to propagate their arguments, and thus contributes to the rise of nationalism in Turkey.

Today we can see that the ultra-nationalists are no longer the only group to warn against the EU's possible unspoken aims. Questions are increasingly being asked about the real objectives pursued by the European states. The reforms demanded by the EU, which require a veritable *aggiornamento* of the Kemalist project, are perceived as a threat since they pursue a "hidden agenda".

Let us take the example of party politics. The AKP, the only party currently in power, has vigorously pursued the reforms requested by the EU. As the Turkish candidacy has come up against each successive difficulty, the nationalist wing of the party, fearing a loss of support in favour of the extreme right-wing ultra-nationalist party, has on several occasions disassociated itself from the Prime Minister's position. Particularly noteworthy was its repudiation of the speech made by R.T. Erdogan in August 2005 while visiting the South-East of the country, in which he recog-

nized the existence of a "Kurdish question" in Turkey, up to then denied by all previous governments, and of his attempt to define a double concept of "high identity" (belonging to a common republican citizenship) and "low identity" (recognition of ethnic and cultural particularities). Meanwhile the only opposition party present in parliament, the CHP (the people's republican party, founded by Atatürk), which aims to perpetuate its founder's heritage and is on the left of the Turkish political spectrum, initially supported the government's programme of reforms. During the course of the year 2005, however, the Party's president, D. Baykal, has adopted an increasingly ambiguous attitude towards the EU. Being officially pro-European has not prevented him from militating against the Prime Minister's "capitulations" to the European Union with regard to the Armenian, Cyprus and Kurdish questions. On the day after the opening of negotiations, he accused the EU of not being sincere, and declared that the reference to the Union's "capacity of absorption" could be utilized to put a final stop to the Turkish candidacy.

It might have been thought that the opening of negotiations for membership would put a stop to the tension reigning in Turkey today with regard to the EU.

Unfortunately, the stormy diplomatic marathon of October 3rd has not made it possible to calm the situation. The tensions focused on the question of identity and its various nationalist channels of expression will doubtless mark the campaign for the legislative elections (foreseen for 2007, but which could well be brought forward) and for the subsequent presidential ones. The obstacles awaiting Turkey on its road towards membership of the EU are only going to get harder to overcome.

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