

TURKEY'S ADMISSION TO EU IS A MATTER OF GRAVE CONCERN

“The Turkish are very good people” said the Prince of Metternich 150 years ago after the Chio massacres in Greece. “They slaughter the Greeks and the Greeks behead them. It is a matter off-civilisation”. The question of Turkey joining the European Union (actually, in a first step which may last up to 15 years, negotiating it) is thus not a new issue. It officially started 40 years ago and was marked by a series of successive European Councils’ rulings who never said no but made believe that a yes could come provided some unclear conditions allow for it. The latest one defined a precise deadline, December 2004, when it should be decided whether Turkey meets the so-called ‘Copenhagen criteria’. These are the respect of the state of law, democracy and human rights, and the achievement of a modernised economy able to address open competition. This is how political leaders frenetically started exchanging ‘scientific’ arguments over the past months.

These cover history and civilisation, democracy, economy and international relations. A first salvo came from those who consider Turkey is not part of Europe, nor geographically (95% of its territory in Asia) nor historically. The former Ottoman Empire in Europe was always linked to invasion, destruction and economical drawback such as in the Balkans or in Cyprus. With its civilisation being different, its values would not be those upon which the EU was built. Turkey hit back at Europe claiming it not to be ‘Christian Club’ and the need for it to accept members of other religions (98% of its 70 million population is Muslim). “Turkey is at the doorstep of Europe and wants to be part of the family” said Turkish PM Recep Erdogan. How could one dismiss a country which has been part of all the major treaties regarding Europe? What about the basilicas of Byzants, the colossus of Rhodes or the temples of Ephesus? “We see the EU as a union of political values. A place where civilisations can be harmonised and coexist in peace” added Erdogan, “not a place for a clashing of civilisations”. Turkey would be a bridge between Asia and Europe. For others, its heterogeneous population (including Kurdish tribes), the risk to jeopardize any balance in the EU and the refusal to recognise the Armenian genocide are enough to prove that Turkey is too far apart.

Regarding democracy, free elections, neutral army and secularism, the progress achieved by the Erdogan government is amazing and its march towards democracy, including the status of women, is emphasised. Much remains to be done: attitudes by overzealous civil servants, lack of application decrees for a judicial system which still is not protective (editors put in jail for opinion offences). So many reforms made so swiftly cannot be implemented overnight. And if the role of the Turkish army hardly goes with the view one has of a liberal democracy, it is agreed that it behave more positively than negatively in the recent years. Positions however sharply contrast as to the place of religion versus secularism, and Turkey may not have played it very smartly. Once it said the membership was crucial to bridging divide between West and Muslim worlds or promoted its future role as the only ‘Muslim democracy’, it leant on blackmail if the answer was negative: civil unrest, disappearance of ‘moderate Muslims’, expansion of Islamism. Excluding Turkey would be a terrible mistake in Muslim eyes. Yet, as long as five schoolgirls are allowed to drown in front of schoolmates who are not authorised to save them ‘because they would have to touch them’, or the only training centre for Orthodox popes remains closed, there is still a long road to go. The concept of secularism means everybody is free to practice its religion: this can hardly be respected when 98% of the local clerics are on the state’s payroll.

Economical arguments are not persuasive, even though the living standards in Turkey are 25% of those in the EU. The risk of workers migrations is remote when low costs in Turkey may open new job opportunities (as with former Eastern blocks). The Turkish economy has probably more trumps than figures show and still 10 to 15 years to run before subsidies

enjoyed by European farmers fully apply to it. The well-known deficiencies (high inflation notably) may be more than compensated by the qualities of a hard working population, whose number will be equal to the German one in 2015, as well as by prospects linked to oil transportation (Ceyhan pipe) and water availability.

On the international field, the debate was spoilt by the way America behave (any 'savoir-faire' being considered by this administration as a sign of weakness). Its overwhelmingly support in favour of Turkey, when everybody knows of the good Bush wishes Europe, was enough to raise doubts; hence President Chirac's comments "The US would not want to hear France's views on its relations with Mexico". Turkey, a staunchest ally of Israel, never maintained so friendly links with other Arab states. But a fact remains that Turkey has been an ally since 1952; its belonging to the EU would be a stabilising element in the Region as well as a peace strengthening element. And the need for the EU to reinforce its links with its other partners of the Mediterranean area surely does not oppose the joining of Turkey.

Considering such contradictions, it is not surprising that some rushed enthusiastically to German opposition leader Angela Merkel's proposal for a 'privileged partnership', a way to maintain links with Turkey whilst avoiding the risk of its joining transforming the EU into an international organisation only. The idea is bright but came too late because the EU has already become something which has little to do with what the founding members hoped for. The original concept of Europe is now dead. What could not be achieved at 12 with a strong Franco-German axis will not be achievable at 27 or 32 and the political vision where cohesion was necessary to an efficient powerful Europe with an autonomous strategy doesn't exist any more. The only way to part away from an open single market under the commending of the US is to start working on 'reinforced co operations' in some fields with those states which are prepared to move further ahead together. But for the time being, as Ph. Stephens said in the FT, "there are risks, of course, in giving Turkey its route map into modern Europe –serious ones. But the dangers of raising the drawbridge are infinitely greater" whereas in the meantime, negotiations will allow to keep pressure on Turkey for it to go on reforming.

Luc Debievre, August 2nd, 2004