Conference “The European Perspective of Turkey after the December 2004 Decision”

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##### Session 2: Political and Economic Implications of a EU-Membership of Turkey

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**Baskin Oran (Ankara University): The Political and Geostrategic Context of Turkish EU-Membership**

I tend to view both previous and current relations between Europe and Turkey as the result of an interplay between geopolitics and globalisation. We can distinguish five specific periods of this interplay.

The first period, at which time Turkey first applied for membership in a European transnational organisation, covered the 60’s until the mid-70’s. At that time, the relations between the two partners were positive. The Cold War dominated international relations and Turkey played an important strategic role for the West. At the same time, the EC was weak, facing strong competition from EFTA. It was not sure of its own destiny. **Finally, Europe economically needed the Turkish workers and latter were not numerous enough to create a reaction in politics and the public sphere.**

The second period, extending from the mid-1970’s to the fall of the Iron Curtain at the end of the 1980’s, saw Turkish-EU relations worsen. The Cold War came slowly to an end, the USSR weakened in a gradual process, and with that, Turkey lost its central geostrategic importance. In contrast, the EC’s future seemed brilliant. After the 1975 oil-crisis and the resulting economic recession, the presence of Turkish workers in Europe attracted much attention. In response to the European Council’s decision to exclude Turkey from the list of EU enlargement candidate countries, Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit froze relations to the EU. To add to these difficulties, Greece entered the Community in 1980’s. Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou and the traditional, strongly anchored nationalist politics he represented, constituted a stumbling-block for Turkey. Furthermore, the 12th September military regime brought with its coup d’état of 1980 the destruction of human rights in Turkey, which development was met with high disapproval on the part of Europe. Both current policies and past legacies contribute to the worsening of relations: the Turkish approach to the Cyprus, the Kurdish, and the Armenian questions damaged the country’s image abroad.

The third period, too, was defined by negative developments. With the end of the Cold War, strategic concerns took a back seat in EC politics. The Community no longer felt itself to be in the front lines of confrontation between East and West. Furthermore, it was confronted with the challenge of absorbing the former Eastern European countries. Finally, in the third period, the bitter legacy of the military regime of 12th September remains very vivid and Kurdish and Armenian lobbies very active.

The fourth period was just as important as it is positive. Greece under Prime Minister Costas Simitis no longer feared Turkey, therefore removing the Greek opposition to Turkey’s membership in the EU. On the other hand, Turkey had two great disadvantages which reduced the likelihood that it would be accepted as a candidate country. Firstly, the Turkish political system was not democratic enough. Secondly, Turkey was considered a Trojan **Horse** through which the United States intended to gain influence over EU decision-making; the EU had no intention of admitting a second Trojan **Horse** into the Union. However, both domestic and international factors were able to overcome both of these disadvantages. Within Turkey, political reforms of previously inconceivable stringency were put into effect starting in October 2001. Within this context, two successive legislatory packages amended 44 articles of the Turkish constitution. In addition, under Turkey’s specific EU National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, eight separate packages were put into effect over a span of two years. All this amounted to an unbelievable forced modernisation from above. The second disadvantage, the Trojan **Horse** problem, too, was remedied by the Turkish Parliament’s vote of March 1st, 2003, with which it refused to admit US troops onto Turkish territory as a launching point for a US invasion of Iraq from the north.

It is at this point, after March, 2003, that another equally astounding course of action is taken, this time not on the part of Turkey, but instead by a number of very important EU officials. Such officials start to make statements the like of which had last been heard at the very beginning of the European project. In particular, European Union Commissioner Guenter Verheugen embodies this new development. On May, 2003, he stated that, “In light of the developments we have witnessed in the region of crisis [Iraq], I think that it would be timely to include in the Union a secular and Moslem state”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Also speaking in 2003**, E. Landaburu** said, “The Union must not miss this historic chance. The inclusion in the European family a Moslem country which subscribes to our [European Union] values of democracy and human rights would be a gain for the geopolitical position of the Union. Then we could transform the EU into a global power, the frontiers of which would extent to Iran”. Silvio Berlusconi pronounced that, “To be taken seriously, we [the European Union], too, must develop a military force, as well. Europe can achieve this end by extending its frontiers, especially with respect to Turkey and Russia.” Dominique de Villepin, who was French Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, **is known do have** said – although this was not a public statement –, “One lesson that Iraq has taught us: we don’t need several small countries in Europe, but rather a big one.”

I wish that I had the time to translate at least twenty more similar declarations by such important figures as Verheugen, Martin Schultz, **Bruce George**, Jack Straw, Ben Bot. Instead, I will mention one last pronouncement made by Mr. **Verheugen** in 2004: “All the Heads of **States and Governments** said in **1999 that although Turkey could become a member of the Union, they don’t welcome such a change**. Today, a majority of them support Turkey’s accession for reasons pertaining to foreign and security policies.” This reasoning was a direct result of and was only possible after the 11th of September, 2001.

What happened? What happened is that 9/11 scared the hell out of Europe. First of all, **at the face of** the American invasion, the EU suddenly saw itself **totally impotent. And this impotence also contained the first signs of getting split.**  Indeed, Europe was truly split into two factions through the conflict on whether to contribute troops to the US invasion and occupation force in Iraq. **Secondly, EU saw itself exposed to Islamist terror**.

**The lesson that Europe learned from this experience was twofold. According to European reasoning, although the Union’s economic and cultural affairs were in good condition, in order to be able to challenge the hegemonic United States, it would need to develop a third (military) leg without which the EU would remain a second-class power open to the winds of disintegration. Secondly, the European Union showed an independent reaction to the phenomenon of rising Islamist terror. Unlike the United States, the Union understood that the best way to overcome the so-called Islamic terror was to contend that Islam and democracy are, in fact, not incompatible.**

Therefore, although developing Union military forces in the form of a European army was impossible in the short and middle range, Europe saw itself as able to overcome this disadvantage through the admission to the Union of a country bordering on the scenes of crisis in **the Caucasus**, the Balkans, and Middle East in particular. The only country in the world able to provide this advantage was Turkey.

Furthermore, in respect to a European solution to **Islamist** terror was concerned, the only country in the world that was Muslim and democratic was, once again, Turkey. **It is within these considerations that the Heads of States and responsible authorities of EU, between May, 2003 and late 2004, made statements such as those related above.**

During the fifth and last period which encompasses the present, relations between Turkey and the EU have taken an appreciable turn for the worse. This is due to the fact that, on both sides, domestic considerations have come to override the geostrategic dimension. At the present time, European public opinion reflects a widespread debate over the presence of Moslem workers, a great number of whom appear to be resisting integration into European society. This debate will **probably** have an impact **even** on the decision of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg in the case **Leyla** Sahin vs. Turkey. The Court is likely to uphold its previous decision that the Turkish state possesses the constitutional authority to ban the headscarf from Turkish universities. In contrast, in Europe, nobody would even think of meddling with the headgear of university students. This example makes very clear the impact that Islamic terror has had on European public debate on the integration of Moslems. A second important factor is that Turkey has been made a scapegoat for the use of those who, for various and conflicting reasons, oppose the ratification of the current draft for a European Constitution.

**In conclusion, I consider that geopolitics is very important factor for the candidacy of Turkey.** **If one day Turkey is to be admitted into the European Union**, this will be due to its geopolitical importance. Seen from this perspective, the apparently astounding events of 2003 amount, in fact, to a repetition of the events of 1950. One could say that, at the outset of the year 2003, Turkey stood at the same threshold it crossed in 1950. Prior to 1950, Turkey had submitted two official applications for NATO membership, as well as making one unofficial bid for acceptance. All three attempts were refused. However, when the Korean War started in 1950, the United States made it its first priority to summon Turkey into the organization.

On the other hand – and here I come to the second part of the conclusion –, the process of globalisation is working against Turkey’s renewed geopolitical importance. At the present time, the EU is challenged by domestic debate, while Turkey faces rising nationalism. I am of the opinion that both phenomena result from globalisation, reflecting the process’ impact on the EU and on Turkey, **respectively**. In Turkey, unbelievable forced modernisation from above has brought forth a reaction which takes recourse to stringent **and** **Eurosceptic** Turkish nationalism. Similarly, the EU feels its identity threatened by Muslim workers, most of whom are Arabs and not Turks, who attempt to avoid integration.

1. Author’s translation from the **Turkish newspapers**. All following statements have been likewise been translated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)