

A Particular Difficulty in Turkey-EU relations

Turkey-EU relations is a subject that has been on the agenda for far too long.

Its historical background, the arguments, technical, practical, philosophical or otherwise in favor or against Turkey's membership, the respective positions of Turkey and the EU in this or that negotiation chapter are well known and well repeated.

There is a vast literature accumulated on all these issues.

Therefore in my speech, I will try to elaborate on one single issue that was at the top of my agenda during the last four years while I was serving as Ambassador in France.

I consider this issue as one of the most important obstacles that threaten the safe conduct of Turkey's negotiating process.

I refer to anti-Turkish membership policies and discourses of some European leaders and the apparent coolness that this caused in Turkey-EU relations over the last few years. These policies greatly contributed to diminish enthusiasm in Turkey for EU membership.

Movements against Turkey's membership to EU in Europe have basically two starting points:

- The first starting point can be defined as "sincere, genuine concerns" of conservative people with right wing tendencies.

The apprehension of these people is based essentially on religious reasons.

As objecting to Turkey's membership because of its religion would be "discrimination", except some marginal extreme rightist groups, those who have religious objections to Turkey's EU membership prefer to base their objections to "Cultural differences".

Then there are other sincere reasons of opposition such as

- The fear that a massive influx of low-cost Turkish workers to Europe would cause a raise in already existing unemployment,
- The perception of Turkey as a "poor country",
- The worry that Turkey's membership would bring the problems of its surrounding countries towards Europe,
- The uneasiness about the fact that Turkey, if it becomes a member, due to its large population would be somehow "over represented" in European organs and would become one of the biggest countries of the Union.

The list is not exhaustive.

But whatever the pretext, it is generally based not on Turkey's realities but on how Turkey is perceived.

As a matter of fact, the common European who has sincere concerns about Turkey's membership to EU is either not knowledgeable about or simply chooses to disregard Turkey's secular system, its functioning democracy, the shape and the scale of the Turkish economy, its industrial capabilities, its export products and exportation volume, its importation capacity, its market assets and opportunities, its political and economical reach over the regions such as the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Central Asia, the Middle-East and beyond, the Mediterranean, its integration and shared values with the Western World and Europe.

He is just reluctant on the membership of a big country that he perceives as a “poor Muslim nation”.

- The second starting point of the movements against Turkey’s membership is the domestic politics of the countries where these movements flourish.

In this case the circles that openly object to Turkey’s membership are targeting the right wing votes and the extreme right.

Those circles use the same argumentation with the “sincere objectors” but overstate this argumentation in a much louder way and thus influence not only their target masses but also the general public opinion in their countries.

I had the privilege of serving as ambassador both in Germany and in France. Two countries that are now among the main opponents of Turkey’s membership.

* When I served in Germany, Chancellor Schröder was in power and the federal government was supporting Turkey’s candidacy.

On the other hand, Ms.Merkel who was just elected to the chair of CDU was against this candidacy and was trying to establish this position as a party policy.

The stillborn idea of Privileged partnership emerged from the efforts of finding an acceptable alternative to full membership and therefore is the brainchild of CDU.

I remember since the very beginning trying to convince the CDU officials about the non-acceptability of such an empty concept by Turkey.

At that time Chancellor Schröder's SPD-Greens coalition government was holding the power with a majority of only 8000 votes. These 8000 votes were belonging mostly to German citizens of Turkish descent.

An opinion research conducted by Essen based Turkey's Studies Institute showed that %78 of the Turkish electors had participated to the elections.

About %80 of them had voted for the SPD-Greens coalition.

While the German citizens of Turkish origin, being traditionally conservative, were expected to vote for the CDU/CSU, they had voted for the left wing parties.

The reason of this "derogation" was, again according to the Institute's research, the more liberal immigration policies of the coalition parties and their positions towards Turkey.

I am sure Ms.Merkel and the top brass of CDU too were aware of this fact.

But obviously they were thinking that if motivated and convinced to vote, the non-voting portion of conservative German-Germans who fear the results of large scale immigration movements, as well as people who keep their distances towards the "guest-workers" would outnumber those 8000 votes.

Ms. Merkel, probably herself sincere in her feelings against Turkey's membership to EU, has shaped a party policy on this logic.

- The French government policy towards our EU membership was positive too when I started my term of duty in Paris in November 2005.

Although the constitutional amendment that imposed a referendum for future memberships, instigated by President Chirac, had created additional difficulties for the venue of Turkey's membership, Mr. Chirac had personally contributed to the taking of the EU Summit decision to start the negotiations with Turkey on 2005.

France's stand on this issue changed with the election of Mr.Sarkozy to the Presidency.

President Sarkozy, with an insistent and energetic anti-Turkey's membership discourse, aimed to bring the far rightist and rightist votes to UMP.

At this point we, as the Turkish Embassy in Paris, were wondering whether "Turkey was really an important factor in French domestic politics or not".

We had the impression that it was not.

We were also trying to figure out, if "to be against Turkey's candidacy to EU was really a crucially important issue in France". "Were anti-Turkish positions approved and adopted by the general French public?"

To find out we decided on an opinion research.

A prestigious French firm, the "Opinion Way" conducted a wide scale research on our behalf.

1045 people belonging to different sectors of the society were asked questions about Turkey and its importance in French political life.

The answers were classified according to age groups, voting patterns and knowledge levels of the individuals.

The result was very interesting. It happened that only 6% of the French people thought of Turkey among problems encountered by the EU.

Questions relating to Turkey's membership to EU were ranked 17th out of a list of 20 foreign affairs issues that were followed-up by the French public.

In short, the research showed that the public, although conceptually reluctant to EU enlargement, was not specifically concerned about Turkey's membership as such. Unless specifically mentioned, Turkey would not come to people's minds in France!

Then why was Turkey brought to the first lines of the political agenda in France in every single electoral occasion?

How could Mr. Sarkozy impress the right and far right electorate in France with his anti Turkey's Membership rhetoric?

There were two main reasons:

First, just before the rejection of the European Constitution by the French people, President Chirac had made a policy statement, explaining among other things the advantages that Turkey's membership would present to the EU.

Political circles in France were convinced that this statement had contributed to the negative venue of the referendum.

Thus, they were careful to distance themselves from Turkey's full membership.

The second reason was more complex. In France Turkey was being used by right wing politicians to attract people who were against the Muslim minority in this country.

In fact, there is a great Muslim community living in France.

The number of these people who are mostly of North African origin nears 5 million. 2,5-3 million among them are voting.

Due to lack of efficient integration policies a large portion of this community is not well integrated into the French society.

They live among themselves; most of the time isolated from the rest of the society, observe their own traditions, are mostly unemployed and cause unease among the “Franco-Français”.

As a result, taking a political attitude against the non-integrated part of Arab-French community pays off in internal politics.

But obviously it is not wise to take position against a large community that has millions of votes.

Instead, French politicians seeking right and far right votes put Turkey forward, putting emphasis on Turkey’s religion and implying that they would not want “70 thousand Muslims” in the EU.

In doing so they give their message to their target masses without alienating the great Maghrebin community.

- Both the sincere opponents and the politically motivated ones gather sometimes around another artificial debate in the context of Turkey’s EU membership. This is questioning Turkey’s “Europeanness”.

- Is Turkey European?

Turkey throughout its history has been an important European actor.

It has opted for “Westernization” almost 200 years ago and entered into a European orientation.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk institutionalized the western orientation of Turkey after the foundation of the Republic. Western values became values of the Turkish Republic

and the way of life for the Turkish people.

Today Turkey is either a founder or an old member of all European bodies and institutions, with the only exception of the European Union.

While some people discuss whether Turkey is European or not, a member of the Turkish parliament has been elected President to the Council of Europe. Moreover, Turkey is preparing to assume the Presidency of the Ministerial Committee of the Council of Europe on November this year.

With this background, Turkey is not only European but also exerts a strong western influence within its surrounding geography.

Along with cars, TV sets, electronics, home appliances, heavy machinery and construction services, Turkey is also exporting culture, ideas and values to its neighbors and beyond. This culture, ideas and values are all western oriented.

EU should not overlook the advantages of having on board such an influent country with a large Muslim population, secular and democratic, whose economy ranges among the first 20 of the world, who is a part of the Western world, shares the Western values and exerts a Western influence on a difficult geography.

But regardless of its pretexts, rhetoric against Turkey's membership to EU has negative impacts on Turkish public opinion.

This impact shows itself as a general lack of trust against the EU.

As a result more and more Turks are feeling less confident about European engagements and the validity of

European undertakings. The belief that the European Union does not respect its contractual obligations is gaining ground.

Together with this lack of confidence, the enthusiasm in Turkey about being a EU member, which was very high in the beginning, is fading. The support to the whole process risks to become uncertain.

The assurances of the opponents to Turkey's membership to EU stressing that "they are not against Turkey but against Turkey's membership" are not considered as sincere and cannot be understood in Turkey.

The common Turk thinks that there is no difference between being against Turkey's membership to EU and simply being against Turkey.

Due to Turkey's membership being at the top of the political agenda for all these years, the Turkish public is now highly sensible about all development regarding the negotiating process. The statements of European political leaders are followed closely and affect most of the time the public's feelings against the countries of these leaders. The public is conscious that European leaders who declare themselves against Turkey's membership are denying the decision taken by consensus by 27 Member States at the EU Summit in 2005. They are aware that this denial is a breach of *Pacta Sum Servanda*. This awareness leads to a widening mistrust towards the validity of European Union's ethical criteria.

On the other hand this political rhetoric has grave impacts on European opinions too. The common French or German who is warned continuously about the disadvantages, risks and perils of letting Turkey adhere the European Union is being conditioned against the

outcome of an already difficult negotiation process.

We all know that Turkey's accession process encounters many difficulties and Turkey's accession to the EU will not be an easy one. The negotiating framework itself contains conditions that are more restrictive than those imposed by the EU to former acceding countries.

Adding artificial difficulties that are basically addressing domestic policy concerns to already existing ones will serve no one's interests.

More than ever, we need to take a careful and dispassionate look at the real obstacles that exist in Turkey's difficult path and try to surmount them.

And we should refrain to jeopardize even further the safe conduct of Turkey's accession negotiations.

When the time comes to decide whether or not to accept Turkey's membership to EU, all criteria and standards of Turkey and the European Union will be synchronized. Such an outcome would serve not only the interests of Turkey and the European Union but also the whole surrounding region would benefit enormously.
