

EU ENLARGEMENT AND THE ISLAMIC CHALLENGE

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The geographic expansion of the European Union, known as widening, poses challenges and presents opportunities to the EU itself, but also to the member states and the candidate countries. It also affects the deepening of the Union and its efforts for institutional reform, which is not an easy task, as the failure of the constitutional treaty and the difficulties faced by the Lisbon treaty have shown. Today (January 2009), there are three candidate countries: Turkey and Croatia, which started accession negotiations in 2005, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) which has been granted the status of a candidate country, but has not yet started accession negotiations. There are also five potential candidate countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo under Security Council Resolution 1244. These countries have been promised the prospect of EU membership as and when they are ready.

While accession talks and preparations are under way, the debate over Turkey's European prospects and identity is heating up and a variety of perspectives, positions, opinions and arguments are put forward. The former president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, while arguing for the commencement of accession negotiations in 2005 he asked Turkey to show "determination in pursuing further reforms and wisely conduct an accession process which, like all the others, will display both periods of progress and moments of tension and unavoidable difficulties."¹ He also appealed to the member states and the European public to demonstrate equal perseverance, as "Europe has nothing to fear from Turkey's accession."²

¹ Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, (1999-2004), "The Commission's Report and Recommendation on Turkey's Application", presentation to the European Parliament, 6 October 2004.

² Ibid.

After three years of accession negotiations, difficulties and Turco-skepticism are growing over Turkey's membership prospects. Europe's confusion and ambivalence about Turkey is not a new phenomenon, although recently it has been becoming more visible. For example, in March 2007, Turkey's government was not invited to the Berlin Summit which marked the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, causing disappointment in Ankara. A few years ago, the fear of many Europeans about Turkish accession were expressed and stirred up by the former French President and head of the European constitutional convention, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who in a blunt manner declared that Turkey was "not a European country" and that its inclusion in the EU "would be the end of Europe."³ In a similar vein, echoing Turco-skepticism, a European Commissioner brought back memories of the Ottoman siege of Vienna by stating that "the liberation of 1683 would have been in vain"⁴ if Turkey joins the EU.

On the other hand, there are strong voices arguing that Turkey can play the role of "a cultural and physical bridge between the East and West [and] become one of Europe's most prized additions."⁵ Across the Atlantic, the United States has a clear pro-Turkish position that cannot be ignored. In June 2004, during the NATO summit in Istanbul, the American President George W. Bush underlined that position and called on Europe to prove that it "is not the exclusive club of a single religion" and that "as a European power, Turkey belongs in the EU."⁶

The increasingly polarized discussion over Turkey's position and role in Europe will continue for years to come at various levels. The debate may even outlast the protracted period of accession negotiations during which not only negotiations on the *acquis* chapters will be conducted, but also a lot of diplomatic maneuvering and political twisting will take place. Throughout this

³ Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, "Pour ou contre l'adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union Européenne", interview with *Le Monde*, 9 November 2002.

⁴ Frits Bolkenstein, Dutch, European Commissioner for Internal Market 1999-2004, speech at the University of Leiden, 6 September 2004. In his speech, Bolkenstein cited the pre-eminent historian and Islamic expert Bernard Lewis.

⁵ *Washington Times*, "Turkey's Continental Drift", 10 October 2004.

⁶ Remarks by President George W. Bush, 29 June 2004.

period, the Christian and Islamic worlds will have to show that they can accommodate each other and prove false Samuel Huntington's argument about "the clash of civilizations" and the reconfiguration of the political world "along cultural lines". Both Europe and Turkey will find out what they expect from each other and whether they can share a common future that will reconcile their different pasts. The real question will be whether the internal sociopolitical dynamics and external orientations of Turkey can be compatible with the changing dynamics of European integration, which aims at deepening the solidarity among peoples "while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions", and creating "firm bases for the construction of the future Europe".⁷

In the long run and in a broader sense, the challenge for the EU will be to develop a forward-looking world-view based on a multicultural civilization that has ample room for different religions including Islam. In a shrinking world of increasing interdependence and a new European order of deepening and widening integration, this may no longer be a political option, but an urgent imperative. After all European integration is a process of building unity through diversity. In a few years, not only Turkey, but also the Balkan enlargement, which will include more countries with Moslem populations, will pose the same challenge. In the light of these developments, Turkey is not a test case, but a turning point.

⁷ Treaty on European Union (consolidated version), Preamble.