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Dear Turkey, Play it Long and Cool

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How should the current impasse between the European Union and Turkey be interpreted, and how should Turkey react?

Commissioner Olli Rehn says there is no train crash, but rather a slowing down because of works on the line. The Commission manifestly seeks to avoid a crisis, while being obliged to react to the non-implementation of the Ankara Protocol. Actually one can read the measures taken – namely to freeze (or not to open) 8 out of the 35 chapters of accession negotiations – in even lower key than Olli Rehn. The so-called ‘negotiations’ are not really negotiations at all, rather a process for monitoring Turkey’s unilateral adoption of the EU *acquis*. Turkey can perfectly well carry on its long process of unilateral convergence on the EU *acquis* in any case. The Commission’s staff will be happy to remain in constant informal contact with Mr Babacan’s team. Whether this process continues in or out of formal negotiations does not really matter at this stage, and the Commission will continue to review progress in its regular reports in any case. This requires that Turkey sees these measures as contributing to the ongoing modernization of Turkey’s democracy and economic governance. Turkey already has full access to EU markets through the customs union, so this not a matter of trading market-opening concessions, but rather one of choosing anchorage on European standards to improve domestic governance.

Of course there are deeper political issues here at stake, which cannot be swept under the carpet. What are the underlying intentions of the EU and its member states? Or, even more important but harder to assess, how may the political attitudes of the EU and its member states evolve over the next ten years (the shortest conceivable time frame for accession)? As of today Turkey has a serious constituency of support in the EU. Italy, Finland, Spain, Sweden, UK among the member states, together with the Commission, which wants the negotiations to succeed (assuming a solution to the institutional questions left unanswered by non-ratification of the Constitution). The new member states are not against. This really leaves France, Germany and Austria representing the objections of ‘old Europe’, and then the special case of Cyprus.

Will the attitude of old Europe change, and if so over what time horizon? The objections of old Europe are a mix of concerns of the elites for the governability of an EU of over 30 member states (e.g. 27 + Croatia, Turkey and in due course other Balkan states) and, as regards Turkey, popular and indeed populist concerns about immigration, European identity, Islam and terrorism. On the EU’s institutional/constitutional issues there is virtual consensus over the broad need for a set of reforms in any case, with or without Turkey. These will have to be finessed through the processes of negotiation and ratification in due course, maybe soon after France’s presidential election in mid-2007.

More difficult is the immigration-European identity-Islam-terrorism nexus of issues, as currently perceived by public opinion. Europe and Turkey are both still afflicted by the 9/11 syndrome; not quite the hysteria seen in the US, but still very serious societal tensions aggravated with the spread of suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks in Madrid, London and Istanbul, the assassinations in Holland, the vandalism in the Paris banlieues and the Danish cartoon affair. Any moderately-well informed citizens in Europe know that immigrant Turks have not been responsible for acts of violence, Turkey is not a source of radical Islam, and Turkey has the most secularized and democratic polity of any country of Muslim culture. However for some populist newspapers and politicians in Europe this is too much detail. Islamophobia, due to Osama bin Laden and various radical Islamic preachers in Europe's mosques, is currently a rough image in the mind-set of European public opinion.

Turkish immigrant communities are caught up in this image to some degree. Objectively there could and should be a progressive transformation of these populist perceptions, and even a 180 degree turn around regarding people of Turkish origin and Turkey as a state. The post 9/11 semi-hysteria should calm down, as the global terror phenomenon is hopefully progressively overcome. But as this is done Europe and its new immigrant communities will have to come to terms with each other. This is unavoidable. The immigrant communities will not be going home. On the contrary they progressively become citizens of member states of the European Union.

At the same time we now observe the rise of moderate, non-violent Islamist political parties in the South Mediterranean Arab countries. While no-one talks there of following the Turkish model, and indeed the Kemalist inheritance in Turkey is unique, a familiar model of transformation of these Islamist parties can be detected: as they approach or reach power their agendas become increasingly 'ordinary' political agendas with declining religiosity in their operational programmes. The EU begins to take note of these trends. The popular legitimacy of these 'Muslim democrats' is evidently growing in much of the Arab-Mediterranean world, contrasting with the depressingly authoritarian if not repressive regimes presently in power there. In this context Turkey as a political and societal success story should come to be appreciated more widely. Even Pope Benedict seems to have noticed this now, and changed his mind over Turkey's possible EU accession, which is all the more remarkable in view of his supposed infallibility.

At the same time European attitudes to immigration could and should change, and indeed have begun to do so. Europe is going to have a demographic labour shortage. East Europe has even worse demographic deficit problems. Large-scale immigration from Africa will continue to be resisted. Turkey in a decade or two will have seen its own demographic profile change, from quite rapid growth now, to zero growth by 2020. The idea then of a certain renewal of immigration from Turkey could come to be seen as a rather reasonable option. But first Europe's policy makers have to come to terms with their looming demographic/pensions crisis. This begins to be the case, with both Germany and the UK raising the retirement age last week. But the full future impact has yet to be digested by the politicians. Germany could be the country where a change of political attitude towards the Turkish candidature could be the most crucial, as the number of German citizens of Turkish origin grows, and as the integration of second and third generations of new minority communities is progressively normalized, and the demographic deficit strikes hard.

Finally, what about the Cyprus question? While most of Europe regarded Mr Denktas as having been completely unreasonable in his time, now Mr Papadopoulos is the unreasonable party, while Mr Talat is absolutely reasonable. How should Turkey react to the unreasonable Papadopoulos? Escalate? No, better reinforce Mr Talat's reasonableness with Ankara's reasonableness. Encourage Mr Talat to continue to settle the property questions, with compensation to departed Greek Cypriot owners, and legalization of new titles. Repatriate part of the Turkish army. Northern Cyprus is

ridiculously over-militarised. The visitor sees a Turkish army base behind every bush. There is no risk in, say, halving these forces. The UN green line remains, and the threat of Greek Cypriot invasion of the North is not of this world. Besides reinforcements could be called in within an hour. Mr Papadopoulos says he is interested in reviving the UN process, but all readings of Greek Cypriot claims for renegotiation (which are however not transparent) seem to be in favour of a more strongly centralized federal state, which looks like being unacceptable to the Turkish North. But the UN game will go on, since the EU says that it looks to this for a final solution, but I suspect that few really believes in this. As regards the opening of Turkish ports for Greek Cypriot ships and of Northern Cypriot ports for anyone, the status quo is in both cases politically ridiculous and of minor economic significance. For Turkey to move first would have the clear advantage of improving its reputational score even more.

So, dear Turkey, play it long and cool. Accession is a decade away in the most optimistic of cases. This has a positive side to it, since it gives time for realities and above all perceptions to change. It would be completely futile and indeed counter-productive, to make the following speech (no doubt favoured by some) "either the EU gives a clear message today along the lines 'complete alignment on the Copenhagen criteria and you are guaranteed entry', or Turkey will walk away from Europeanisation and go its own way". In the meantime carry on with your huge modernization mission, with special emphasis on improving educational achievement of the bottom half of the system (the Turkish university educated elite is already famously impressive), and reform of various aspects of the judiciary and media freedoms that are still archaic (viz. Pamuk-type case). Continue alignment on the EU *acquis* unilaterally, with priority for those elements that are clearly useful for Turkey's own economic and political system.

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