

Turkey and the “New Europe”: A Bridge Waiting to be Built

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the EU's newest members – having identified a number of shared interests that make collaboration between them desirable, if not inevitable – have begun to speak with a single voice on a range of key areas of EU policy. Some of their shared interests have yet to be articulated, however. One of them, and among the most important, is the new member states' support for future EU enlargement, including Turkey's EU accession. With Turkey in sore need of an advocate that can make a strong case on behalf of its EU bid, Ankara and the “new Europe” should reassess the importance of their relations, define areas of common interest and intensify cooperation. From the EU-10 perspective, increased cooperation with Turkey promises to deliver positive results in a number of policy areas, including immigration, energy security, trade and foreign affairs.

The past twelve months in particular have seen intensified cooperation among the post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. These include the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), the countries of Central Europe: the Visegrad Group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary), as well as Slovenia and the Balkans (Bulgaria, Romania). Owing in no small part to their shared experience under communism, the EU-10 members share a broad commonality of interests. There are, of course, differences on some foreign policy issues, as well as a handful of bilateral disputes. With the launch of a series of mini-summits on areas of common concern – initiated by Poland, the largest member of the group – cooperation between the EU-10 has recently acquired a quasi-institutional dimension. Thanks to the mini-summits, consensus has been achieved on issues

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such as EU climate change legislation, the Eastern Partnership, and steps to tackle the current economic crisis. Support for further EU enlargement – including Turkey’s accession – is another issue where the post-communist countries’ interests and policies are aligned. On this issue, however, the EU-10 have not yet managed to articulate a common stance vis-à-vis their European partners.

Characteristics of the new EU members

By means of alliances and coalitions, small states have the potential to play a greater role within the EU than one would expect given their population and economic clout. The principle of unanimity rules the day in Brussels when it comes to voting on issues of key importance: for better or worse, a single country is sometimes all it takes to block a key decision. In instances where qualified majority voting does take place, the small states’ voting power is more (symbolically and quantitatively) than just a factor of their population.¹ Small states also benefit from the EU’s rotating presidency, which gives countries at the helm, regardless of their size, significant sway over the Union’s decision-making. Between 2010 and 2019 a total of twenty member states will enjoy six-month stints atop the EU Presidency. Eight of them will come from the ranks of the new member states; this includes the back-to-back Hungarian and Polish presidencies of the European Union in 2011.

The EU-10 includes two large countries (Poland and Romania are the Union’s 6th and 7th most populous member states, respectively), three medium-sized countries (8-10 million) and five small ones (2-5 million). The combined population of these 10 countries – over 100 million – is more than 20% of the EU total. Although their combined economic output is 12% of the EU’s cumulative GDP, members of the EU-10 have experienced exponentially higher growth over the past decade than the “old” member states. Poland, the EU’s best performer during the current economic downturn, is the only member state not to have entered recession in 2009. As their share in the EU’s GDP stands to increase significantly, the new members will transform from being net beneficiaries to being net contributors to the EU budget. As a result, their position within the EU will strengthen further.

The new EU members have proven adept at working closely with Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Finland, with whom they share a number of interests – and who, though not among the biggest member states, enjoy a strong position in the EU. The Eastern Partnership, initiated by Poland and Sweden, is a case in point. Sweden and Finland also share the EU-10’s support for further EU enlargement.

Historical legacy: Turkey’s ties with the new members

The unique historical links that bind Turkey and some of the new member states (particularly Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania) are the bedrock on which future relations can be built. Though the experience of confrontation with the Ottoman enemy is a prominent feature of these countries’ historiographies, the tradition of coexistence – on a scale unseen in Western Europe after the sixteenth century – is just as important. Today, what with opponents of Turkish accession often rallying history and culture to their cause, and depicting Turkey as Europe’s age-old enemy and “other,” this tradition of coexistence is of particular significance.

Bearing in mind that Poland and Hungary will take charge of the EU presidency in just over a year, emphasis needs to be placed on their historical links with Turkey. It might be worth citing in this context that for several centuries medieval Hungary was the only place in Europe other than Sicily and the Iberian peninsula with a Turkish Muslim minority; that the Muslim Tatar community of Poland has survived since the Middle Ages, a situation without precedent in Europe; that a number of Polish Tatars became great patriots and national heroes;² that Ismail Gasprinsky, the foremost ideologue of pan-Turkism, used the Polish Tatars’ integration into Western society as a model for all Turkic peoples; and that members of the Tatar minority have played an important role in the modernization of Turkic nations.³

Turkish-Ottoman culture and language have left a lasting mark on Polish and Hungarian societies. For several centuries, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth shared a common border with the Ottoman Empire. Neighborly strife, throughout this period, was by far the exception rather than the rule. Although most history books highlight the 1536 treaty between the Ottomans and the French, it was with the Poles and Lithuanians that the Ottoman Empire signed its first “historic” treaty of friendship, in 1533. In the 16th and 17th centuries Hungarians like Imre Tholoky fought on the side of the Ottomans against the Hapsburgs. In subsequent years a number of Poles and Hungarians, having converted to Islam, were to become successful intermediaries between the West and the Ottomans, as well as agents of cultural syncretism in several fields.⁴ Between the 18th and early 20th centuries the Ottoman Empire offered sanctuary to Polish and Hungarian exiles, including Ferenc Rakoczy and Lajos Kossuth. An enduring symbol of this is the village of Polonezköy, 30 km east of Istanbul, a settlement founded by Polish exiles in 1842. In the 19th century Poles perceived the Ottoman Empire as their nation’s main ally in an eventual war of independence against Russia. In fact, Poland’s greatest

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poet, Adam Mickewicz, came to Istanbul in 1855 to organize Polish forces – under Ottoman command – against Russia in the Crimean War. (He died later that year in a house in the city’s Tarlabaşı district.) These are more than arcane historical trivia – to this day, Poles and Hungarians remain well aware of the support that the Ottomans lent the heroes of their respec-

tive independence movements. And to this day Polish schoolchildren are taught that the Ottoman Empire was the only world power not to have ever recognized the partition of Poland between Austria, Russia and Prussia.

For their part, Polish and Hungarian thinkers have played a significant role in the development of Turkish identity and national consciousness. The Polish general Konstanty Borzęcki, having settled in Constantinople in the mid 19th century, authored one of the seminal works of Turkish political thought, “*Les Turcs anciens et modernes*.” In the 19th and 20th centuries Poles played an important role in supporting Muslim national movements in tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.⁵ Hungarian nationalists, meanwhile, contributed plenty of intellectual (but also pseudo-intellectual) input into the growth of Turanism, an ideology that stressed the unity of all Turkic peoples including, as some believed, the Hungarians themselves. Moreover, Hungarian Turkologists like Armin Vambery made lasting contributions to the study and development of the Turkish language.

Today, this historical legacy could be put to work in the service of a wide range of cultural initiatives. Józef Bem – a national hero of Poland and Hungary, who converted to Islam and became an Ottoman army general – could be made the focus of a conference on the common historical legacy of Turkey, Poland and Hungary. Armin Vambery could be the patron of a Turkish cultural festival in Hungary; and Konstanty Borzęcki could be one of the faces of “The Year of Turkey” in Poland.

The EU-10’s importance for Turkey

Turkey has good relations with all the countries of the EU-10. One measure of this is the fact that all EU-10 governments support Turkish membership in the EU. Moreover, as a recent Eurobarometer poll indicates, the vast majority of citizens in the EU-10 – unlike their counterparts in the old member states – support Turkey’s accession, provided it complies with all of the EU’s conditions for entry.⁶



Photo: AA, Dursun Aydemir

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For Turkey, the new member states are valuable partners for several reasons. First, the EU-10 are known to play a leading role in the development of EU policies towards regions of key importance to Turkey – their activity within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy and their leading role in initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy project being a case in point. (Romania’s contribution to Black Sea Synergy has been particularly strong.) Many of the new member states also enjoy strong bilateral ties with countries of the post-Soviet space.⁷ Ankara would be wise to realize the potential for cooperation with the EU-10 in dealing with the Caucasus and the Black Sea, not to mention Russia.

Second, the new member states’ support for Turkey’s membership in the EU is a particularly valuable asset at a time when challenges to Turkish accession are mounting. At the beginning of the decade, Turkey’s EU bid could count on the active support of Gerhard Schroeder’s Germany and the backing of Jacques Chirac’s France. As of the past few years, however, Paris and Berlin (at least as far as Angela Merkel’s CDU is concerned) have become opposed, if not openly hostile, to Turkey’s EU accession. With the weight of Britain’s support for Turkey’s EU bid tempered by the UK’s uneasy relationship with Europe and Gordon Brown’s tenuous hold on power, and with America told to mind its own business whenever it

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enters the debate, no single country has managed to replace Germany as a key advocate of Turkish accession. The EU-10, joining forces with the likes of Italy, Sweden, Spain and the UK, is perfectly capable of playing such a role – all the more given that the EU's new commissioner for enlargement is Štefan Füle, a Czech.

Speeches in favor of Turkish accession are not enough, however. The new member states should take a more assertive stance on the Turkish dossier. In other words, they should endeavor to stop France's stranglehold on the negotiation process with Ankara. Paris is currently blocking five chapters in the accession talks with Turkey on the grounds that their conclusion would hinder French plans for an alternative relationship – i.e. something short of membership – between Turkey and the EU.⁸ In doing so, the French government is clearly going against the letter and spirit of the EU-agreed negotiating framework, which attests that “the shared objective of the negotiations is accession.” The new member states should not hesitate to call France to task for undermining EU solidarity and the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*. Likewise, they should also bring their collective weight to bear on EU debates on the Cyprus question, including the continuing economic isolation of the northern (Turk Cypriot) part of the island.

Turkey's importance for the EU-10

Inasmuch as the new member states are important partners for Turkey, the converse is equally true. From the EU-10 perspective, increased cooperation with Turkey promises to deliver positive results in a number of policy areas, including immigration, energy security, trade and foreign affairs.

Ominous as the old member states' demographic situation might be, that of the EU-10 is actually worse. To sustain the rapid pace of economic development, the EU-10 will soon have to look beyond countries like Ukraine for new supplies of immigrant labor. (Ukraine is undergoing an extremely grave demographic crisis of its own.) Needless to say, Turkey, with its young and dynamic work force, could be a perfect fit.

The potential for strengthening economic relations between Turkey and the EU-10 is also significant. Turkey already enjoys strong economic ties with Bulgaria and Romania, for whom it is a key trading partner (and, in Romania's case, a major

investor). In 2008, 5.5% of Romania’s total trade turnover was with Turkey: the figure for Bulgaria was 7%. Turkish companies are also major stakeholders in both countries’ construction sectors. Between 2003 and 2008 the value of construction contracts awarded to Turkish companies in Romania was nearly \$3 billion USD. In Bulgaria, it topped \$1 billion. Though geographical factors ensure that Turkey’s economic links with Central Europe and the Baltics will never reach similar levels, Romania’s and Bulgaria’s trade and investment relationship with Turkey should become a model for the rest of the EU-10.

Turkey’s overall trade volume with the EU-10 countries increased by a factor of 10 between 1999 and 2008, while its trade with the old member states increased only by a factor of 3.5. In 2008 the EU-10’s share in Turkey’s overall trade was 6.5% (including 10% of Turkish exports). By comparison, the Turkic republics of Central Asia, regarded as very important for Turkey’s foreign policy agenda, accounted for less than 2.5% of Turkey’s trade balance. In 2009, a crisis year, the volume of Turkey’s trade with the EU-10 contracted less sharply than its trade with other countries. It can be safely assumed that the volume of trade will be on the rise again once Turkey and the new member states move out of recession and back onto a high growth trajectory.

To date, however, Turkey has attracted relatively little capital from the countries of the former communist bloc – this, despite the fact that it has attracted exponentially increasing levels of foreign investment over the past decade. There have been some notable exceptions to this trend as of late, including the \$610 million sale of Eczacibasi Generic Pharmaceuticals to the Czech drug maker Zentiva and a \$600 million purchase of SEDAS, a grid company, by the Czech energy giant CEZ. It is also worth recalling that in 2005 the Polish and Hungarian energy companies PKN Orlen and MOL made a bid – albeit an unsuccessful one – for Tupras, Turkey’s largest industrial company. These exceptions aside, the countries of Central Europe and the Baltic states would do well to take a much stronger interest in the Turkish market, given its size, dynamism and low labor costs.

Turkey’s EU membership has vital implications for enlargement to the Western Balkans and, in the long run, to Eastern Europe. Without Turkey’s accession to the EU, European leaders are unlikely to ever consider EU enlargement to Ukraine, a top foreign policy goal for Poland. Moreover, Turkey’s presence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia is a valuable asset for the entire EU and the EU-10 in particular. Should Turkey’s relations with the EU deteriorate, its policies vis-à-vis these regions may soon diverge from – and work to the detriment of – the EU’s interests. Turkey is already in the midst of a historic rapprochement with

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Russia. Marrying its Eastern policy to Moscow's regional agenda – a very possible corollary of an EU 'no' to Turkish accession – would effectively push the US and Europe out of both the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is a scenario the EU-10 would certainly like to avoid.

Having begun to appreciate Russia's predilection for using gas and oil transit as a foreign policy weapon, the EU is desperately looking for ways to diversify its energy supplies and transit routes.

The EU-10 countries – many of whom have bore the brunt of Moscow's bullying energy policies – have been leading advocates of strategic diversification. Several countries of the region (Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) are part of the project to build the Nabucco gas pipeline, which aims to deliver gas from the Caspian basin through the Caucasus and Turkey to south-eastern Europe. Turkey, as the only possible overland transit route for Caspian gas, remains the project's lynchpin. The fact that Ankara is uniquely placed to connect Nabucco to gas supplies from Northern Iraq and Qatar – given fears that there may not be enough gas to fill the pipeline to capacity – only underscores its indispensability to the project.

Due to the size of the Turkish economy, its huge agricultural sector and relatively low level of income, Turkey's accession will not only be an advantage but also a challenge to the new member states. To a certain degree, therefore, Turkey and the new members will compete for EU funds. Given the rapid pace of their economic growth and modernization, however, as well as the slow pace of Turkey's negotiation process and the inevitable reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy ahead of Turkish accession, the rivalry between Ankara and the EU-10 will be much less intense than expected.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Just as they have done on issues like climate change and the financial crisis, the new member states should organize an EU-10 summit on enlargement and Turkish EU accession. This would signal two things: that it is not only Paris and Berlin who set the tone in the debate on Turkey's membership; and that Turkey's advocates inside the EU are able to speak clearly with a single voice. In the meantime, Ankara should embrace a strategy that focuses on building and strengthening EU

coalitions in favor of Turkish accession. Such a strategy should focus on forging links with groups of EU countries and regional organizations. The EU-10 should reciprocate by improving cooperation with Turkey in regional organizations such as the Visegrad Group and the Council of Baltic Sea States.

This is not to say, of course, that Turkey should forget about strengthening bilateral contacts. In this vein, it would be well advised to place a premium on its relationship with Poland, given Warsaw’s leading role in EU-10 cooperation and its close relations with Sweden and Finland. As far as other bilateral issues are concerned, Turkey and the EU-10 should:

- Strengthen cooperation in the economic and cultural spheres
- Significantly increase the number of bilateral visits (the fact that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s 2009 visit to Poland was the first *ever* by a Turkish prime minister is, in this context, shocking)
- Reinforce institutional links between their national ministries. Less than 6 years having passed since the latest enlargement wave, the EU-10 ministries retain a huge body of expertise in the area of accession negotiations. So that Ankara – facing long and difficult negotiations with the EU Commission – can tap into such expertise, Turkey and the new member states should set up common forums, workshops and study sessions for policy-makers and experts.
- Intensify contacts between NGOs
- Hammer out a few common lines in their policies towards Russia. In this context, a more balanced and assertive Turkish policy – recognition, at least, of certain worrying trends in Russian domestic and foreign policies – would go a long way towards mollifying the new member states’ concerns and anxieties about the nature of Turkish-Russian rapprochement.

An important argument to keep in mind is that Turkey should not take the support of the EU-10 governments and societies for granted. True, the new member states are among Europe’s most enthusiastic supporters of Turkish accession. Much of this enthusiasm, however, derives from overall support for the enlargement process as such. (It comes as no surprise that those who’ve most recently experienced the success of enlargement are its greatest advocates.) In Poland, support for Turkish entry sometimes appears as little more than a byproduct of Warsaw’s strong backing for Ukraine’s EU accession. Without the first, many Polish policymakers reason, you cannot have the other.

This is not enough. The EU-10's support for Turkey must be more than just a manifestation of its overall support for the enlargement project. Turkish accession should be judged mainly on its own merits – otherwise, support for it in the EU-10 may wane very soon and very fast. To prevent this, Turkey must do two things. First, it must thoroughly educate the new member states' elites as to the merits of Turkish accession. Second, it must ensure that they *remain* persuaded over what might be a long and arduous negotiation process. Only then will the EU-10 be able to make a strong and convincing case for Turkey's accession – not only in Brussels, but also at home.

Endnotes

1. In line with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, a “double” majority of at least 55% of all member states who represent at least 65% of all EU citizens will be required to pass most laws in the EU Council. Given that the EU-10 represent 37% of member states and 20% of the EU's population, their voting power is indeed significant.

2. Aleksander Sulkiewicz, a Polish Tatar, was one of the closest associates of Józef Piłsudski, the father of Polish independence in the 20th century.

3. Maciej Sulkiewicz was prime minister of Crimea (1918) and Chief of Staff of the Azerbaijani army.

4. Ufki Bey (born Wojciech Bobkowski) was a composer of highly original music that combined traditional Ottoman genres and Western elements. He was also the first Muslim to transcribe oriental music into European notation and the first person to translate the Bible into Turkish. Ibrahim Muteferrika, a Hungarian, set up the Ottoman Empire's first printing press and authored a groundbreaking memo calling for modernization of the Ottoman state.

5. Mammad Amin Rasulzade, the father of Azeri nationalism, spent 10 years in Poland where – supported by the Polish government – he conspired to secure Azeri independence. He spoke Polish and was married to a Polish woman.

6. See: Eurobarometer 69 (2008). The highest support (64% in favor and 15% against) is in Romania, Poland (57% and 29%, respectively), Slovenia (57% and 38%) and Hungary (53% and 35%). A plurality of Bulgarians, Estonians and Lithuanians are also in favor of Turkish entry. A relative majority of Czechs and Latvians are against, though the gap between the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ group is relatively small. Only in Slovakia do the outright majority of citizens oppose Turkish accession.

7. Poland and the Baltic states maintain very strong political ties with Ukraine and the countries of the Southern Caucasus. Romania, meanwhile, plays an active role in the Black Sea region, particularly in Moldova.

8. They are: economic and monetary affairs, agriculture and rural development, institutions, regional policy, and financial and budgetary provisions.