

Why those who oppose Turkey's EU membership bid are wrong

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Introduction¹

"They are not only Europeans. They do not have the will to take part in the European integration project. Their membership will derail the European project. The USA and NATO are behind their membership application. The country is too big. It will bring the institutional system out of balance. Their agricultural sector is not compatible with the common agricultural policy."

This was said by a French president and it is not President Sarkozy talking about Turkey. The words are de Gaulle's and they date from 1963 when he vetoed British membership in the then European Economic Community. In the same year Ankara signed the so called "Ankara Treaty" that offered a membership perspective and the following year the first chairman of the European Commission Walter Hallstein, stated that Turkey was a part of Europe and that this had been an established fact for centuries.

For 45 years Brussels has thus assured Turkey that it will one day belong to the European Community and these promises have been repeated and made concrete, especially during the last decade. Turkey entered into a customs union with the EU in 1996 and its candidacy for membership of the EU was confirmed in Helsinki in 1999. On 3 October 2005, EU member states agreed to start formal membership negotiations with Turkey.

When accession talks were secured in Helsinki, Turkey was in a deep economic and political crisis and many member states thought that the promise to open negotiations could be given since Turkey would not be able to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria. Those opposed to Turkey's membership were obviously surprised by the reform policy of the new AKP-government and now talk less about the country's "EU maturity" and the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. Instead they argue that the EU cannot absorb a new member the size of Turkey and that Turkey is not a European country. They also affirm that Turkish membership would cause serious geopolitical and strategic problems and, last but not least, that the EU is a community based on Christian values.

¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any other institution or organisation

The absorption capacity of the EU

With 27 members the EU is said to be an over-extended structure, and that further geographical expansion can only take place at the expense of deepening political cooperation.

This line of argument - that Europe is not powerful enough to absorb Turkey - can only be described as political tactics. If there was any truth in it, it would have been used 15 years ago when the EU's eastward enlargement process started. In those days the main opponents of Turkish membership, like the CDU/CSU in Germany, were the keenest advocates of enlargement. The project of building a strong United States of Europe on the American model is no longer on the political agenda after the accession of ten new members in May 2004, and even more so when Bulgaria and Romania became members of the EU last year. With the eastern enlargement the European Union in fact chose to become an all-European commonwealth and not a European super-state. The new enlarged EU will for the foreseeable future be a political and economic union with variable geometry, concentric circles and different speeds of integration. What objection can there be to Turkey's incorporation into such a union, particularly in view of the fact that, with its geographical location, size and decades-long membership of NATO, Turkey is a strategically important partner which would, by itself, enhance the role of Europe in global politics more than the ten new members combined?

According to demographic prognoses Turkey will have a population of 82 million in 2015, making it almost as big as Germany. Ten years later it would be the largest member state with 87 million, or 15.5 per cent of the population of the EU, while Germany's share would be 14.3 percent (in comparison to 18.1 today). The Turkish part of the population will thus be smaller than that of Germany today. Demography is one of the most pressing problems facing the EU, not least in Germany. Turkey, with its large and young population, could help solve this problem.

In a system where the decisions are taken with double majorities - 55 per cent of the member states and 65 per cent of the population - Turkish membership would not, in spite of the size of the country, have a dramatic influence on how the union functions. Turkish membership would imply changes in the European Council and the European Parliament but not in the Commission where Turkey would have one post or become part of the same system of rotation as the other members. If the number of seats in the European Parliament remains at 732, Turkey and Germany would occupy at most 82 seats each in a further enlarged EU, against Germany's 99 today, with similar reductions for the other big member countries. Such a scenario implies long and difficult negotiations where the smaller member states will fight for their present number of seats.

Turkey will of course be an important actor and increase the possibilities for the other member states to make alliances, block initiatives or carry through decisions. Like other member states it will enter into alliances to promote its own national interests

The geographic argument

It is often said that Turkey is in Europe but that it is not of Europe. However, is there a European history without Turkey? Europe cannot be defined according to any absolute geographical, religious, cultural or historical criteria. The Treaty of Rome states that *any European country* can become a member of the community; not that 100 percent of the territory must be situated on the European continent. The Turkish "European" territory, with its 24,000 square kilometres, is substantially larger than EU-members such as Malta, Cyprus, Luxemburg and Slovenia and only marginally smaller than the Baltic states, the Netherlands and Belgium. And the population on the European side is much bigger than that of Sweden and many other member states. In the east Turkey borders two Christian states, Armenia and Georgia, and the capital Ankara lies west of the member state Cyprus, which, like Malta, lies south of Tunisia.

Giscard d'Estaing, one of the most pronounced opponents of Turkish membership, has repeatedly pointed out that in junior school he learnt that Anatolia belonged to Asia. President Sarkozy is using the same argument, but neglects to mention that he was elected President of France by votes from French Guyana in South America, Tahiti in the Pacific Ocean, Reunion in the Indian Ocean, Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean and the islets of Saint Pierre and Miquelon off the Canadian Atlantic coast. *Voilà les frontières de l'Europe.*

Several opponents also ignore that de Gaulle, as mentioned earlier, once opposed British membership on the basis of Europe being a continent to which the British Isles did not belong. Giscard d'Estaing also used language as a dividing line claiming that Turkish is not an Indo-European language and therefore lacks European character while Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian are closer related to Turkish than to the Indo-European Germanic and Slavonic languages. Maltese, another official European language, is furthermore Semitic and thus closer related to Arabic than to any European language.

Security and geopolitical arguments

The geopolitical and strategic arguments that were used in favour of the accession of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the Baltic States are valid for Turkey too. In fact, this is even more true than it was in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. Some day the enlargement process will come to an end, but terminating it without admitting Turkey would be a serious mistake and an unwise policy. Those who are opposed to Turkish membership seem to think of the EU as an "island in the sun", a Switzerland surrounded by good, friendly neighbours. But Europe's geostrategic location is far from idyllic. The EU must stabilise its own periphery to ensure that it is not affected by the problems that exist in its periphery. Turkish membership would strengthen Europe on its most vulnerable southeastern flank.

Turkey now faces three geostrategic choices: affirmation of its European identity, rapprochement with the Arab and Muslim world, and integration with the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. There is no doubt that the present Turkish government has chosen the first of these three options and that the country's political and economic elite are playing the European card. If this fails because the EU defers its decision or refuses to admit Turkey to the Union, both the other options would become more feasible. In that case, the friends of modernisation would probably not be able to persist in their pro-European stance.

Both the pro-Islam and the pan-Turkic option would entail serious consequences for the stability of Europe. Even though Turkey is not likely to achieve a dominant position in the Central Asian Republics, the mere attempt to do so would have a destabilising effect and also exacerbate the existing problems in the Caucasus. It is in Europe's vital interests to see to it that the problems in the Middle East, including Iraq, and the southern periphery of the former Soviet Union do not converge. There is an obvious risk of this happening if Turkey were to play the pan-Turkic card.

The second option, rapprochement with the Arab and Muslim world, would have an adverse affect on Europe, too. One argument against Turkish membership is that part of the EU's external frontier would abut on the most crisis-ridden and troubled region in the world and that Europe should at all costs keep away from the problems of the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular. But we cannot escape this part of the world and its problems, and therefore the opposite conclusion is the most credible one: a rapprochement between Turkey and this region would bring its crises closer to us. The idea that a Turkey excluded from the European Community could be a firewall against the crises of the Middle East is politically naïve. All the crises in the Middle East so far have directly affected Europe, and they will affect us even more in the future. If Turkey were a member, this would increase the EU's opportunities for pursuing a proactive policy in the Arab world. This is not without risks, but if Turkey remains outside the Union this will have serious consequences. A stable democracy in a Muslim society, on the other hand, could stand as a model for a Muslim world that badly needs such models. The Turkish membership of the EU would demonstrate the falsity of the argument that Islam and democracy cannot mix and help to bring about favourable changes in the Islamic world's attitude to Europe.

A no to Turkey would, on the other hand, have a radicalising effect both in the Muslim world at large and within Turkey itself. It will strengthen the argument of the fundamentalists that the Muslim world must turn inwards because the rest of the world conspires against it and it will strengthen those in Turkey who question the reform policies of the current government.

The identity factor – is the EU a Christian community?

The resistance to Turkish membership is not only motivated by fears about the EU's lack of absorption capacity and the risk of importing problems and disturbances, but also by vague qualms about a culture that is regarded as alien. One argument that is now gaining ground, especially in Catholic Europe, is linked to identity, namely Europe's Christian values, which are mentioned as a reason for keeping Turkey out. In that case it might just as well be argued that Greece should not have been admitted to the EU because of its Eastern Orthodox roots, that "semi-Oriental" such as Romanians and Bulgarians should be kept out too and that Albania and Bosnia are forever doomed to be Muslim ghettos in Europe.

What will happen if the secularisation process in Europe continues? Where do the limits of identity go? Will a secular country such as Sweden have to leave the EU in the not too distant future when the number of Muslims who go to mosques for Friday prayers is larger than the number of churchgoers on Sundays?

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has emerged as a result of the transformation of Turkish Islamism and has come to power in free elections. Turkey is now undergoing a historic reform process that is mainly motivated by the prospect of EU membership. Prime Minister

Erdogan wants to transform the AKP into a modern European party - a Muslim version of a Christian Democratic Party - and he needs Europe's support for this process.

There have never been any religious criteria for membership of the EU. To refuse Turkey's admission on religious grounds would send a wrong and dangerous signal, especially after 11 September 2001. Such a decision would ignore the fact that Islam is a mainstream religion in Europe today. Nowadays 10-15 percent of the population in most Western European countries were born outside their present home country, and a growing percentage of them were born outside Europe. More immigrants arrive in Europe every year than the USA. There are currently at least 15 million Muslims in the EU, which is more than the number of Protestant Scandinavians, and the number will increase as immigration continues.

The trend towards a multiracial and multiconfessional Europe is therefore unstoppable. This trend will be further strengthened by current demographic trends in Europe. Today, the birth rate among Muslim immigrants in Europe is three times higher than in the non-Muslim population. If this trend continues the Muslim population will, given current immigration patterns, have doubled by 2015, while Europe's non-Muslim population will decrease by 3.5 percent. Some estimates of the number of Muslims in Europe in 30 years' time are as high as 65 million. Islam is thus already an integral part of Europe and a European religion and, just as we have talked of Eastern Christianity in the past, so we will soon be talking about Western Islam. Islam must therefore be recognised and regarded as a "domestic" European religion.

Only a depoliticised and liberal Islam can be integrated into Europe, and such integration is only possible if it is paralleled by economic and social integration. A future Europe with a flourishing Muslim presence and an open European identity must therefore be based on self-criticism, a permanent and open dialogue and respect for diversity. We must realise that Muslims can make a positive contribution in the construction of a new Europe. Their presence should be seen as a source of enrichment and not as a problem. A *no* to Turkey on religious and cultural grounds would be disastrous for Europe as it would send a strong and immediate message to the fastest growing segments of the European population that they will always be considered unwelcome and second-class citizens, even if they choose a secular way of life.

Sending such a message could lead to the emergence of a ghetto Islam in Europe, instead of a modern tolerant European Islam. Radical mullahs all over Europe are already exploiting Muslim immigrants' psychological, cultural and material problems for their own purposes, and this message would only make their work easier. In such a case we might indeed witness a "clash of civilizations" in Western Europe, not in the form of a military showdown between the West and the Islamic world as was envisaged by Samuel Huntington, the proponent of the clash of civilisations theory, but in the form of continuous guerrilla warfare in ghettoised suburbs of our cities.

Turkish membership of the European Union would facilitate a necessary integration process and thus counteract a development fraught with momentous consequences for Europe. In an increasingly globalised world it is not possible to draw borders based on a static view of history and an identity that has been constructed and decided upon from above. Europe is tantamount to democracy, rule of law, separation of state and church, equality between sexes, freedom of speech, dissociation from ideological salvation doctrines and a functioning market economy.

Membership in the European Union is therefore not predestined, but the result of social, political, cultural and economic processes that bring together peoples who, as the overwhelming majority of the citizens of Turkey, see themselves as Europeans.

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