

Turkey and the EU: An Awkward Candidate for EU Membership?

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**Ashgate Publishers, (Aldershot, Hampshire, 2006) xi + 291 pp
ISBN: 0 7546 4762 5**

Ever since his Progress and Development Party (Ak Partisi, AKP) swept to power in the elections of November 2002 with a huge parliamentary majority, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP government has won high marks in EU circles for carrying out an impressive range of reforms. In December 2004, satisfied with Turkey's record on the Copenhagen criteria, the European Council recommended that accession negotiations open on 3 October 2005. In all previous cases the start of accession negotiations by candidate countries has heralded a process that inexorably led to full membership. However, no one in Turkey or Europe could take ultimate Turkish accession for granted. Indeed, after a period of achieving unprecedented progress with reforms to satisfy membership conditions, Turks are facing a chorus of scepticism in several European circles regarding the wisdom of admitting Turkey into the EU.

On what grounds do EU members object to Turkey's membership? Does the EU approach to Turkey's membership differ from that which Brussels pursued vis-à-vis the Central-East European countries (the CEECs) that achieved membership in 2004? What type of relationship does the EU envisage to have with Turkey? These are the leading questions that Harun Arikan seeks to answer in his detailed and ambitious study which provides a remarkable 33-page bibliography. Utilising an impressive array of sources, there is practically no dimension of the Turkey-EU relationship that the author does not consider. While his overall expertise is not in doubt, his book has many shortcomings that detract from its worth.

The grounds on which many Europeans oppose Turkey's membership are variations of the oft-repeated argument that Turkey is too big, too poor, too Muslim and non-European. Whether the reasons cited by opponents of Turkish accession stand up to close scrutiny or not is a matter of opinion. In Arikan's view these do not justify keeping Turkey out of the EU. It is true that Turkish living standards lag considerably behind most of the EU countries. On the other hand, the author shows that Turkish per capita GDP is similar to those of Bulgaria and Romania that have

already become EU members. Compared to European countries, a high proportion of Turkey's labour force is employed in agriculture and the enormity of the task of preparing this sector to achieve European standards is commonly acknowledged. However, this has been true as well in regards to Bulgaria and Romania. In a notable respect, Turkey can claim to have outperformed many European countries in achieving impressive rates of economic growth. Still, as the author points out, Turkey's large population (reportedly 73 million in 2007) and the potential costs of elevating Turkish living standards to those of EU members are major considerations among those Europeans who object or have deep reservations regarding Turkish accession. Furthermore, just how European Turkey is has been a recurring question among those Europeans who are sceptical about Turkey's qualification to become a part of the EU's civilisational project. European opposition to Turkey on cultural grounds was famously stated by former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the architect of the EU's controversial new constitution. In an interview with *Le Monde* on 8 November 2002, arguing that 95 per cent of Turks do not live in Europe, he bluntly declared that Turkey's accession would "be the end of Europe". Arikian notes the weight of the cultural factor in European opposition to Turkish accession but does not elaborate adequately on this all-important dimension in European-Turkish relations.

That the EU has treated Turkey differentially from other applicants is a theme that runs throughout this book. The EU supported the CEECs in their quest for membership with an effective pre-accession strategy by using the accession carrot to help them achieve the needed reforms for EU convergence. By contrast EU policy "to Turkey has neither included a firm accession commitment, nor a clearly defined comprehensive accession strategy to support Turkey's efforts to integrate itself with the EU". As the author repeatedly states the key to explaining this differential approach is that the EU is not really interested in facilitating Turkish accession. As he puts it, Brussels has pursued "a containment strategy" vis-à-vis Turkey, "designed to delay indefinitely the prospect of membership while anchoring Turkey in the European structure through close relations". It is no wonder that European caginess regarding Turkish accession has weakened the standing of pro-EU forces in Turkish society, a conclusion that has been reached by numerous other observers of Turkish-EU relations.

For many years the EU petitioned Turkey to undertake reforms that would end restrictions on the human rights of its citizens, and complained that Ankara lagged behind other applicants in achieving such progress. While the author notes the human rights deficit as an impediment to Turkish progress in its EU accession process, he argues that the EU could have facilitated Turkish advances in this area by giving Turkey the kind of support it provided to the CEECs. Above all, whereas the CEECs could expect accession at the end of the process of political reforms, no

such commitment was forthcoming in Turkey's case even after the EU's Helsinki summit that declared Turkey to be a candidate for accession in 1999. These arguments are undoubtedly plausible. However, the reader would have been better served if the author focused as much on the Turkish political scene as he did on the Europeans in explaining the difficulties of achieving human rights reforms in Turkey.

Not all of the EU member states have the same stake concerning Turkish accession, and there are some members for whom the issue is of no consequence at all. The author could have usefully surveyed those members that play active roles in the deliberations concerning Turkey in EU councils in order to explain their policy preferences. Obviously, EU member Greece has had a special and powerful stake in Turkey's membership and the author sensibly devotes a full chapter to evaluating the Greek factor. Unfortunately for the reader, beyond describing the issues that divide Greece and Turkey and stating that Greece effectively delayed progress on Turkey's EU membership path, the author's analysis sheds little light. Arikan offers no explanation for the change in Greek policy toward Turkey's EU membership in the aftermath of the Abdullah Ocalan fiasco and the "earthquake diplomacy" between Greece and Turkey in 1999. Also, surprisingly, there is no reference to the remarkable policy change on the Cyprus issue of the AKP government that paved the way to the Turkish Cypriot endorsement of the Annan plan in April 2004.

This volume, published in 2006, is a revised and updated version of an earlier edition of Arikan's book. It is most unfortunate that the updating has been inadequate, neglecting important developments such as the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU in April 2004 and the headaches this has caused for Turkey. There are other shortcomings as well: the most obvious are the dozens of spelling errors that are found throughout the book. Surely this and related problems such as poor wording and missing words, could have been fixed by copy editing. In the final analysis, this volume will be judged primarily on how much light the author sheds on the larger issues related to the Turkey-EU relationship. The author makes a credible case that the EU has not treated Turkey as well as other applicants for accession. However, he is not always convincing in his often repeated thesis that the EU has been pursuing a containment strategy toward Turkey. Besides, he could have made a greater contribution to the literature on Turkey-EU by providing a good deal more analysis of Turkish domestic politics and how it affected Ankara's approach to the EU.

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