



Turkey's Non-European Perspective

Karolos Gadis

On November 29, 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that “Turkey has other alternatives to the European Union, but has not yet closed the EU book.” More vividly, on October 21, 2016, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, during a conference of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), affirmed, *inter alia*, that “the European Union should not forget that Turkey always has other alternatives,” a reference to the unsuccessful, up-to-now, Turkish efforts to come effectively closer and accede the European Union (EU).

There is no doubt that in every EU enlargement process - 1973, 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007, 2013 but also in the current discussions with other candidate countries - many thorny and delicate points emerge, between EU institutions from one side and the acceding states from the other. Nevertheless, even the most difficult problems, always have been resolved, under a spirit of cooperation and consent. Put in other terms, the agreements were confirmed by the treaties of accession that followed.

Judging by its present statements the Turkish leadership - extending in some way a number of previous ones in the same direction – seeks to create a European novelty. For the first time in EU history, a candidate country is directing threats against the European Union itself, the very international body to which it aspires to accede!

Turkey's relations with the European Economic Community (EEC) were harmed by a series of military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Nonetheless, the European Union, on December 1999 named Turkey as a candidate (eligible) country for accession. Turkey signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 1963 and in October 2005, after delicate and difficult discussions, the EU agreed to start open-ended negotiations.

In that respect, we have to congratulate the EU officials for their flexibility. In parallel, we have to pay tribute to Greek diplomacy for having an open-minded approach, focused on the substance of the enlargement procedure. Guided by a long-term political vision, Greece supported Turkey's European path despite its differences with Turkey, even at the risk of provoking the dissatisfaction of some European partners which had and still continue to have substantial reservations on the matter.

Recently, EU Commission President Jean Claude Juncker asked Turkey to "proceed with its commitments vis-a-vis the EU," while in Brussels, many European officials underscored the principle that "Turkey is acceding to the EU and not the EU to Turkey." We must ask what scenario allows a nation state that wishes to enter an international body while not recognizing all of its present members or the existing principles of that organization? This is not only practically impossible but also theoretically inconceivable. How could it be possible for Turkey, while wishing to enter the EU, not to recognize Cyprus, already a member state of the EU? How could it be possible for any state, wishing to enter an international organization, to systematically violate the most basic rules of International Law on Good Neighborly Relations against a member state of this organization in the way Turkey is applying a "casus belli" (war cause) policy against Greece, another EU member state. This policy violates on a daily basis the most essential rules of International Law on the matter. How could it be possible for Turkey to accede to the EU while scoffing at the fundamental right of freedom of religion by its continuous threats and actions against the Ecumenical Patriarchate of worldwide Orthodox Christians?

At the end of the Cold War, Turkey tried to perform a new role within its geopolitical dynamics, a role that has considerably strengthened after 9/11, Turkey wants to be being seen as a "bridge" between the West and Islam due to its Islamic religion while retaining the secular character of its governments. Nevertheless, actual Turkish practices have led to a large majority of European and international reports on religious freedom to be extremely cautious about conditions and some of them are severely critical of Turkey. In 1923, approximately 330,000 Christians, most of them of Greek origin, lived in Istanbul a city of one million inhabitants at that time. Today, only a few thousands still live there, after the majority of them were expelled in 1955 and in 1964. On the other hand, if someone requests information related to minority issues in Turkey, the standard government reply minimizes or denies the existence of minorities in Turkey!

The European Union accession rules have been applied - neither more or less favorably - in an equal and objective way to all the present twenty-eight member states. Any Turkish attempt to trade curbing refugee and migrant flows from the Middle East

in exchange for abolishing the “here and now” visa regime for Turkish citizens is unacceptable. Such diplomatic blackmail that exploits a tragic humanitarian question would provide a strong argument to all who blame Turkey for undermining cooperation with Europe and the European institutions on the matter

As far as Turkey’s geostrategic role is concerned, we have to bear in mind that current military technology, does not require in every case “boots on the ground” but gives opportunities for operational control even by extensively long distance. Despite Turkey’s significant geostrategic role, the big question is to what extent this role is “usable” by the West. A good number of articles in the international press focus on Turkey’s fight against ISIS, while other ones underscore Turkey’s cooperation with ISIS. In this context, who could say with certainty that, in a hypothetical scenario, Turkey would consent to grant military facilities to the West, as it did not do so in 2003.

During the final weeks of 2016, President Erdogan publicly put in question the International Treaty of Lausanne, a treaty which contains, inter alia, regulations regarding the wider South East Mediterranean area and to a great extent the Middle East. Is this the kind of regional policy that our friends from Turkey wish us to follow?

Are these statements the Turkish contribution for stability, development and cooperation in the wider South East Mediterranean area? In that respect, even after Ahmet Davutoglu’s departure from the position of Prime Minister, his ideas on “Strategic Depth” and “Neo-Ottomanism” are still present in Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s policies.

To what extent does Turkey really have the will to get closer to the European Union? President Erdogan’s statement, “If I have to choose between Turkey’s European perspective and my policy on the Cyprus question, I opt for the second one,” can deliver only a very small amount of optimism for solution to the Cyprus problem and a “European Turkey.” Erdogan’s statement dates from 2006 and spin doctors can claim “2006 is not 2016,” but Turkish policy on this matter, is the same, then and now.

Very often some analysts underscore if Turkey’s way towards Europe faces insurmountable obstacles, there is the “risk” of Turkey turning to some “alternative” options of cooperation. The supposed risk for the West is to “lose” Turkey. These perspectives are certainly fueled by statements of Turkish leadership such as the one noted above.

Every initiative for political and economic cooperation is always seen as a scenario in which Turkey is going to leave or to stay within the framework of what we call the “Western Alliance”. The question is not theoretical. If Turkey stays in the same

framework of international, political and economic obligations within the Western Alliance, what could be the real value of any alternative option, the latter presented as a “substitute.” Does the Turkish leadership estimate that any “alternative option” could alienate or abolish Turkey’s obligations within the “Western Alliance?” If no, to whom are these “threats” are addressed? If yes, the West must reconsider the whole status of Turkey’s political perspectives.

The AHIF Policy Journal | copyright © 2017 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the AHIF Policy Journal are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.
