

Nationalism and the Turkey - EU relations: Perspectives from both sides¹

Since almost two years nationalism in Turkey is on the increase. The nationalistic discourse encompasses the internal relations between different social, ethnic and religious groups. It has also extended to the Turkey EU relationship. Although the accession negotiation process is continuing on a technical level, the public discourse in Turkey about its EU ambitions has died down. While in the past the Turkish military forces seemed to be one factor in the country that is ostensibly pro-European, the announcements of the National Security Council and Chief Commander of the military last spring left the impression that this is no longer the case. In its press statements, the military explicitly accused the European Union of being interested in dividing Turkey and supporting those forces that are to be considered enemies of the state: human rights activists and civil society organisations demanding a democratic, pluralistic state which recognises ethnic and religious minorities. The negotiation process between Turkey and the European Union started only two and a half years ago. But instead of moving steadily towards a rapprochement, both sides seem to be drifting apart. Those forces inside the European Union that favour Turkey's EU accession also seem to decrease, while those favouring a so-called special relationship dominate the debate. It is not only Nicholas Sarkozy who is explicitly against Turkey's EU membership, other countries - like Germany - have become sceptical towards the project they voted for only some years ago. Where do these developments lead the EU and Turkey? Is there a will and a way to open up this bottleneck? What can and should be expected from both sides to reverse the process of drifting apart?

Nationalism is the fabric of the Republic of Turkey, because as the „heir“ of a dismantling world empire the Republic of Turkey was a mix of nostalgic fears and hopes for the future. Nationalism was among the many projects with which the former elite had tried to save the empire from its enemies, from imperialistic infiltration and, generally, from being dismantled. Historically, other projects were being used e.g. a multi-ethnic citizenship, but the latter did not work out against the background of the formation of Christian nation states, especially on the Balkans.

Islamism did not really work either because of the official ideology of the non-compliance of the Arabs and other populations - who incidentally chose to go their own way. Turkish nationalism was based on lessons learned, especially on the Balkans, from the tragedy of the Muslim and Turkish populations fleeing out of the newly established Christian nation states.

The Balkan tragedy was formative on the implementation of the tragedy of 1915. Turkey's link with Germany played a crucial role in causing the displacement and

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massacre of the Armenians. This was a lesson that was learned from a failure itself, the fear of the others and the choice for security. In that particular sense, the early republican period can be seen as the citizens' exchange of rights and liberties against securities and defence since the Ottoman chunk was the last vestige of Turkish and non-Turkish (mostly) Muslims - fleeing into its heart for protection.

The early theoreticians of Turkish nationalism were not even ethnical Turks. The allegiances towards the newly established Turkish identity were stronger within other Muslim populations with the exception of the Kurds. Also, because people had to change their religion in order to escape from different forms of persecution, they had to establish an identity for themselves and frequently underline a little too aggressively that they were, indeed, Turkish.

After the flight of the Christian population in the aftermath of the 1915 events (the Armenian Massacres) and the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, a new Turkish bourgeoisie had to be created, because it had been this population that was involved in trade and commerce. This new population had to be taught how to be Turkish. Ceremonials were created for learning how to be a modernist Westerner, but in line with a Turkish-ethnic origin.

Different faces of Turkish nationalism

Turkish nationalism has different faces and it becomes functional whenever there is a crisis. That was very much the case with the flaring up of the conflict in South East Anatolia in 1984, the Kurdish problem, where nationalism was taken down to the roots of people's fears. It also emerges whenever there is a problem with the EU accession process - where Turkey had to discuss a lot of issues at the same time not only minority rights for the Kurdish, but also rights for „new groups“ like women, gays and lesbians, Roma who were all setting up associations, which was a lot to adapt to for Turkish people.

Nationalism can be functionalised: in Turkey there is Islamic nationalism, left-wing nationalism, Atatürk-nationalism, even a liberal wing of nationalism. Nationalist language is being used to explain crisis situations instead of trying to understand the past. The fact that it is a very complex issue, provides us with room for optimism: nationalism does flare up in crisis situations with the help of politicians and the media, but with civil society organisations becoming more active in dispelling that kind of position, there could be a hopeful future for Turkey. More people should speak - in Turkey and in Europe. The mutual lack of knowledge is feeding nationalism in Turkey.

Deep state *Derin devlet* is a reincarnation of the seventies left wing Kemalism. It is more anti-EU with traces of anti-Americanism especially after the invasion of Iraq. The „red apple coalition“ is a huge coalition of nationalist forces. There is a coalition between this nationalism and the state nationalism, Atatürk nationalism. If there is a deep state it is a more aggressive and ultra right version of this general „official“ nationalism.

However, nationalism is not only a Turkish problem. If you look at the EU-Turkish relations over the last ten years through the lens of nationalism – there is also a question of nationalism in Europe.

There is no such thing as *one* Turkish nationalism: there is a constant strive among different nationalist projects. One has to understand this in order to understand what is going on these days between the AKP and the secular establishment. Erdogan is not an a-nationalist politician: he just has a different version of Turkey in his mind. The main dividing line between nationalist projects in Turkey today is the axis of secularism/anti-secularism and Westernism/anti-Westernism. In the seventies it was different: Westernism then was associated with anti-Americanism, especially on the Left. Today it is about the EU: one is against the West or in favour of it. Today, secularism is the main dividing line which cuts across society. All national projects are along this axis. Only, the part that is secular and Western is empty: Turkey does not have a social democratic or left party. Maybe Atatürk's original foundation of nationalism was Western and secularist, but today Kemalism is not as it used to be.

AKP and the Kurdish problem

In most European languages a difference is made between patriotism and nationalism². This difference does not exist in Turkish and the educational system still teaches you to be proud to be nationalist. The history text books have not changed for 60 years. In most countries in Western Europe they have on order to give some sort of neutral position though Turkey's neighbours Greece, Bulgaria and Romania may not differ very much from Turkey in this respect. Although Turkey pretends to be a secular country it is not. It is a country where there is a state religion, a state religion with a 100.000 imams and state-paid employees. How can the AKP which is a religious party be secular and make reforms especially in favour of minorities like the Alevites? Still, there have been some changes during the last ten years, the Kurdish and the Armenian issue can be discussed now and there have been some changes concerning religious education, but the progress is very slow. Where should one place the AKP on the earlier mentioned axis and how can one explain the existence of the ultra nationalist group Ergenekon?

The AKP is at the left hand side of the axis (anti-secularism) but they have a problem with secularism as it is understood by the Kemalists. They do not care about Article 301 of the Penal Code (which makes it a crime to insult "Turkishness") nor are they really interested in putting the ultra-nationalists on trial.

There is a huge hegemonic struggle going on (between the military and the AKP) and a compromise is more and more difficult every day. Maybe one day the AKP will indeed get ideas to make Turkey more Islamist, but there will not only be two two sides in this struggle. There is a third element in the South East: Kurdish nationalism. If there will be a military coup like in 1980 it will be even bloodier, because the Kurds will not just stand by.

² Ethymologically there actually is a difference between patriotism and nationalism also in Turkish, today no difference is made.

In that respect all hope got dispelled in November 2005 when in Şemdinli a local bookstore got bombed. The bombings which were at first officially attributed to the PKK turned about to be orchestrated by undercover agents of the gendarmerie intelligence. At the time Erdogan had made some symbolic openings towards the Kurdish problem. This was probably the turning point where the AKP resorted to its Islamic or better conservative roots on the centre right wing. The Turkish antiterrorism law was toughened with very little protest coming from the European Union. This was also the time PKK lost hopes in EU accession, because it was put on the list of terrorist organisations.

The silence on the EU side may be attributed to the fact that Europe has toughened its stance on terrorism as well, and maybe Europe also wanted to wait and avoid weakening the army, because it was not sure about the real ideas of the AKP.³ Deep state nationalism using right wing and criminals for the dirty jobs of the state is not a new phenomenon in Turkey. In the 1980s, before the military coup, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), was finished off by criminals who were on their payrolls and in the mid-1990s the pro PKK drug lords were cleaned up in the same way. It looks like in 2007 right after the elections; the army went along with what AKP wanted in the headscarf issue as a trade-off with a free role in the Kurdish conflict.

Fears

There are three popular assumptions about nationalism in Turkey:

1. the so-called rise of nationalism;
2. the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism which was used in recent years to discredit Kurdish nationalism. The argumentation is: Atatürk nationalism, Turkish nationalism is civic and based on certain values whereas Kurdish nationalism is ethnic, separatist, therefore it should be dismissed;
3. the myth of the homogenous nation.

However, nationalism is neither „on the rise“ nor does it disappear, it is a continuous super strata: this is what gives nationalism its instrumental value, one day there is a crisis it is there to be used and abused just as efficiently as religion. There is a symbiotic relation between nationalism and certain fears which relate to Turkish EU-relations. Perceptions are not necessarily correct - nationalism is both, cause and consequence of these fears.

What are these fears? In Europe the main fears are immigration, identity, economic fears and socio-cultural fears as security related to 9/11. Most of the economic fears that relate to Turkey's EU membership are not grounded. But realities do not matter after a while.

In Turkey: there is mostly fear of loss of sovereignty. In 2006 66% of the Turks were in favour of EU membership. Today this is much lower. However, at the same time, the

³ The silence was not as complete as it seems to some people: the concerns about the anti-terror law have been expressed and were taken on board by the Commission.

question „Do you think that the EU wants to divide Turkey?“ was answered positively by 50.3%. What is the way out of this dilemma?

The best friend of a Turkish nationalist is a European nationalist: there is a grand coalition of nationalists in Europe and Turkey. Turkey has to do a lot to become a member of the EU, but is there really a willingness from both sides? This becomes more and more difficult to confirm. There seems to be a tacit agreement between politicians from both sides that it is okay like this. Merkel and Sarkozy are part of this problem too.

It is possible that France and Germany just have the fear to be outnumbered by Turkey in case of EU membership? There is no need for this, because in terms of voting there are restrictions on demography. Also, if Turkey becomes a member, this will not happen before 2015. The earliest moment for freedom of movement for Turkish workers will be in 2022 and 4.4 million is the highest estimation of potential migrants which would only be 0.7 per cent of the Union's total population.

Accession Negotiations

There are 35 chapters of negotiations of which the substantial ones are 32 (Financial Control) and 33 (Financial & Budgetary Provisions). Before the decision on 11 December 2006⁴, there was the possibility of opening and closing one chapter. The decision was difficult to swallow and many people thought that this was the end of the negotiations. Cyprus was nervous. Since that decision it has been possible to open five more chapters and this has happened. On technical matters, the negotiations with Turkey are not different from other negotiations. One should not be overwhelmed by the current crisis: the technical negotiations continue. Cyprus has a major impact on the negotiations; it is the main stumbling block. There is hope that the problem with Cyprus will be solved before the end of 2008 as there seems to be willingness on both sides. If this will be solved, it will be a major contribution to progress of the negotiations.

As far as mutual understanding (Turkey-EU) is concerned it has to be said that the Commission has put some money aside for this. Not much is done by the Turkish government, though there are some NGO's working on it. Concerning the domestic political situation, Turkey currently fulfils the political criteria: the situation has not been dramatically changed, but the process is not going very far. On article 301- one keeps hearing the same thing over and over again.

It looks as if the AKP does not care very much about this point. They are thinking of changing „Turkishness“ into „Turkish nation“ which is nonsense: that does not make a difference. The most important difference will be that the article can only be used under the condition that some high authority like the justice minister or the president will give authorisation which would make a difference because in that case high profile cases would never be opened. But now the AKP is forming coalitions with the nationalist party (MHP) which is very tough on 301 and does not want to change it at all.

⁴ The EU to freezes talks on eight chapters and decides that no chapters would be closed until a resolution is found for the Cyprus problem.

However, it has to be said that the AKP is the only reform force in Turkey which wants to go towards Europe. Perhaps current policy towards the constitutional reform is tactical and Erdogan is waiting for the right moment. On the other hand, it will drop off the agenda altogether. As far as minority rights are concerned, the AKP is only willing to act if there is pressure from the Commission! After the elections in July last year many people were disappointed: they had voted for the AKP as a reform force, but the reform is still missing. There is a rapid change of agenda from one day to the other: the military intervention in Iraq, Ergenikon, the new constitution...The AKP is like a ship without a steersman and as such very vulnerable for internal turmoil. The military on the other hand does not want a coup d'état because they do not have a civil representative who can take over job the from the AKP (the CHP has proven incapable), which means they have to compromise and there will be no huge tug of war between the conservatism of the AKP and the conservatism of the Army. As far as reforms are concerned, no progress has been made in the last years and the same is true for most areas in the accession partnership⁵.

⁵ Despite this lack of progress, the Commission hopes to open two new negotiation chapters (company law and intellectual property) at the EU Summit on 19/20 June. See also the new European Parliament report: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A6-2008-0168+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>