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Review paper

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WHY TURKEY SHOULD JOIN THE EUROPEAN UNION: ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF TURKISH MEMBERSHIP

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Abstract

One of the main objectives of the Turkish foreign policy is to integrate Turkey in the European Union. Over the last decades Turkey has unsuccessfully tried to join European Union. For various reasons (economic, political and social), European leaders have blocked the attempts of Turkey to join European Union. There is a widespread belief in Europe that Turkish membership poses a threat to the stability and security of the European Union. This article explains why Europe needs Turkey and why Turkey's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures should not be seen as a danger but as an opportunity for economic progress and development of Europe.

Key words: EU; Turkey; Integration; European enlargement process; democratization.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey has striven to become the full member of the European Union (EU) since 1963 since they signed the association agreement known as Ankara Agreement. Since then, numerous efforts have been made by the Turkish government to integrate Turkey into European Economic Community. Prime minister of Turkey Turgut Özal formally applied for full membership in 1987. The Turkish government was disappointed when most of the EC community members rejected full membership of Turkey. Many reasons have been provided by the EU members for delaying the integration of Turkey into European Union. Among the political reasons, one has to mention concerns over Cyprus issue and the Turkish justice system as well as country's human rights record. Although Turkey has to carry out a wide range of reforms in order to become a genuine liberal democracy, it still remains an illustrative case of ongoing democratization from which neighboring countries can draw important lessons. Turkey has made significant efforts over the last years to carry out democratic reforms with a view to fulfill the EU's Copenhagen Criteria. Turkish government demonstrated firm willingness to continue with reform efforts and accelerate the democratization process of the country. (European Commission MEMO 2013, 1). Turkey's democratic transition is still an ongoing process and before being integrated into European Union, Turkey has to carry out above mentioned reforms.

Turkey is gradually getting closer to Europe. But, it has to be mentioned that there has been a reduction in pro-European enthusiasm in Turkey. Sociological research has revealed that the number of eurosceptics is growing in Turkish society. The European Union has lost its attractiveness and many Turks hold the view that Turkey's accession to the EU is no longer needed. (Morelli 2010, 2). A national survey which was conducted in 2006 revealed that 2/3 of Turks had lost faith in the European Union and had no expectations of gaining membership in the Union. The vast majority of Turkish citizens no longer support the country's accession to the EU. (Akçay and Yilmaz 2012, 18).

Turkey may lose motivation to implement democratic reforms because of the growing European reluctance to integrate the country into the European Union. The idea that Turkey should join EU is not a very popular issue in some European countries. (Straus 2013, 1-4). There is a widespread prejudice in Europe that Turkish membership can bring alone a wide range of problems. Many European politicians think that Turkish membership in the EU will cause the emergence of economic and social problems and will place a heavy burden on the EU budget. Especially right-wing political circles are against Turkey's integration in the European Union. Christian democratic and conservative parties in Germany, France and Austria often criticize the EU enlargement process and hold the view that the candidate states should not be admitted in the Union. (Rios 2012, 5). Turkey's EU accession process began in 2005 but the process is going very slowly. France, Germany, Austria and other European countries influential politicians oppose Turkish membership in the European Union. As former European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein said: "Turkey is too big, too poor, and too different." (Lamb 2004). The aim of this paper is to refute these arguments and to prove that the European Union needs Turkey.

Myth 1: Turkey is too poor and will cost the EU too much

There is a widespread view in Europe that Turkey is economically weak and could be a heavy burden for the European Union. But one has to take into account that with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$786 billion, "Turkey has become the 18th most powerful economy in the world." (The World Bank 2014). Therefore, it can no longer be perceived as the "sick man of Europe". Unlike South European countries which face financial crisis, Turkey experiences rapid economic growth over the last decades. While many European countries have been unable to recover from the financial problems, the Turkish economy grew by 9.2 % in 2010, and 8.5 % in 2011, thus distinguishing itself as the fastest growing economy in the world. (OSEC 2012, 1-3). Turkey managed to overcome financial crisis much better than most of the countries of the European Union. *Per capita* income has increased considerably over the last years and the living conditions of the average Turk is now much better than the socio-economic conditions of his Romanian and Bulgarian counterparts in the EU. Despite the huge success in economy, the number of skeptics who oppose Turkish membership in the European Union has not been reduced. On the contrary, the skepticism is growing. Those who are opposed to Turkish membership in the European Union say that the entry of Turkey will place unbearable strains on the EU finances and will exacerbate financial crisis in Europe. There are political elites in some European countries that are against the EU enlargement process because they believe that enlargement will bring additional socio-economic problems to Europe. These political elites don't like the idea that new members will join the European Union. Skepticism on enlargement was strengthened especially after the 2008 Global Financial

Crisis. European political elites that oppose the European enlargement process started to blame new member states for causing economic crisis and financial problems in Europe. Right-wing political circles perceive eastern European member states as a heavy financial, social and economic burden. These political groups can be found everywhere in the EU. There is a widespread view that costs of enlargement exceed the benefits that Western European countries can get from it. (Gasanova 2014).

The European Union enlargement should not be seen as a danger but as an opportunity. Skeptics should take into account the fact that Turkey is no longer a backward or impoverished land. Turkey's integration into the European Union will increase the size of the European internal market and will make Europe more competitive on the global arena. One has to take into account that Turkey is Europe's sixth largest trading partner. Turkey will constitute a true asset for the Union with its dynamic economy, its special geostrategic position and geopolitical significance. The European Union needs Turkey in order to create a New Silk Road and establish closer economic, trade and cultural relations with Asian countries.

The European countries are especially worried about the high level of energy dependency on Russia. The Ukrainian crisis has demonstrated that Russia is not a reliable partner and the dependence on Russian gas or oil is quite dangerous. Russia uses oil and gas as a political weapon and therefore, Europe is interested in diversifying the supply of oil and gas reserves. The European Union certainly requires new transport routes for energy, and Turkey which is a bridge between Europe and Asia can become an alternative energy corridor. Turkey already plays a very important role as a transit country. Turkey has become a necessary bridge connecting Europe to oil and gas reserves of Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkey matters because of its importance as an energy hub and as a transit country for energy goods. Energy security is an issue of high priority for Europe. Turkey, because of its strategic location, has become "an important energy partner for Europe and its energy strategy is consistent with the European Union's energy security policy." (Arvanitopoulos 2009, 44).

Myth 2: Turkey is too big and if admitted in the EU, Europe will be overwhelmed with Turkish migrants

The European leaders are concerned that Turkey's large population could change the balance of power in the European Union. Although Germany, with 82 million inhabitants, is the largest country in the EU, its population is aging and declining. If Turkey gets admitted into European Union it "would be the second largest country (and perhaps eventually the largest with its much higher growth rate) in the EU and would considerably alter the balance of power in the European Union." (Rosenberg 2014). There is a widespread fear in Europe that if Turkey gets admission to the European Union, millions of Turks will migrate to Europe. According to this view, immigrants from Turkey will take jobs away from native workers and substantially increase the unemployment rate. (Wendicke 2008). But the public opinion research has revealed that there is little basis for this fear. According to the sociological research conducted by Gallup World Poll, very few Turkish citizens have a desire to migrate to other European countries. Massive migration of Turks to Europe is less likely to take place, and the fear of "Turkish invasion of Europe" is groundless. Only 13 per cent of Turkey's adult population expressed a desire to migrate to

Europe. Turkey's record of "economic progress and relative political stability in the last decade are key reasons for this shift." (Sirkeci 2013). The desire to migrate to European Union has decreased considerably because of the financial crisis in Europe and Turkey's steady economic growth. Turkey experiences rapid economic growth, and therefore, Europe lost its attractiveness. The more the Turkish economy grows and employment opportunities are created, the less likely Turks are to migrate in large numbers to the European countries. Turkey is more likely to follow a Spanish pattern:

When negotiations for the accession of Spain to the European Economic Community were launched, France in particular feared that it would be invaded by Spanish workers looking for employment but in reality this never happened. In 1960s and 1970s, Spanish economy started to grow and many Spaniards who had migrated in large numbers to Germany and France began returning to Spain. Since the beginning of 1990s, Spain has become a net importer of people, not a net exporter. Large number of African and Latin American people migrated to Spain since 1990s. As of 2010, there were over 6 million immigrants in Spain, 14% of the total population. (Scoppettone 2014).

It is quiet likely Turkey will follow a Spanish pattern – as Turkey becomes richer, more and more Turkish workers will return to their homeland. Just like Spain, rich and prosperous Turkey could become "a magnet for migrants from the Arab countries." (Timmerman and Mels 2008, 80). The Europeans tend to view Turkish membership through the distorted prism of its citizens migrating to the EU. Immigration from Turkey should not be seen as a danger but as an opportunity for economic progress and development of Europe. Turkey is a stable, free-market economy, which has young and vigorous workforce. While most of the European countries are facing demographic problems and the European population is aging, Turkey is experiencing rapid population growth. In contrast to Turkey, European countries are experiencing acute demographic crisis. In 2003, the natural population growth in the European Union was just 0.04% *per annum*. Nearly all European countries are experiencing continuous population decline and, consequently, a rapid reduction of the workforce. The total working age population (15-64 years) is expected to fall by 20.8 million between 2005 and 2030. (Valverde 2007, 248). The fertility rate in Europe is extremely low. It is below the threshold needed to renew the population. Because of the low birth rates European countries will face serious socio-economic problems in the future: "aging could cause potential annual growth in GNP in Europe to fall from 2-2.25% to 1,25% in 2040." (Valverde 2007, 248). In 2020, approximately 20% of the population of the European Union will be 65 or older compared to less than 7% in Turkey. (Rotaeché and Reyero 2008, 188). An aging society and the shrinking of the workforce is putting strain on the state pension systems of European countries. The generational compact is likely to break sometime in the future as European youth is forced to pay higher taxes in order to support a larger aged population. The biggest challenge that European countries are facing nowadays is how to restore social contract between the generations. One possible solution to this problem is to allow migrants from other countries to settle in the homeland of the native European peoples.

We can take as an example Germany which has accepted large number of immigrants from Turkey in order to solve the problem of acute labor shortage. After 1961, the government of West Germany accepted many Turkish citizens (largely from rural areas)

as *gastarbeiters*. (Sonmez and McDonald 2008, 2). Initially, the German government hoped that immigration would be temporary and after some years, *gastarbeiters* would return to their homeland. But nowadays, because of the demographic crisis, immigration is seen as an opportunity for Germany. The procedures for acquiring German citizenship “have been considerably simplified over the last years, and the governments of the German States have begun campaigns to persuade immigrants to acquire German citizenship.” (RP Online 2015).

As the European population grows older because of lower birth rates and longer life spans, the European Union will have to accept more immigrants from neighboring countries and regions in the future. Turkey’s young and vigorous workforce could be useful and could help many European countries to overcome the demographic problems and the labor shortage. Thus, the problems of an ageing population and shortage of manpower could be mitigated by accepting immigrants from other countries. (Valverde 2007, 251). Turkey could significantly strengthen the military power of Europe. Turkey has the second-largest army in Europe. Turkey’s young population can play a major role in strengthening the European security.

Myth 3: Turkey is too different

The knowledge about Turkey is rather limited and misperceptions, negative stereotypes are widespread in some European countries. Sociological research has revealed that just over 30% of European citizens are in favor of Turkey’s integration into the European Union. Opponents to Turkish membership think that there is a culture gap between the European Union and Turkey. There is a never-ending debate in Europe about Turkey’s *europanness*. Many people doubt that Turkey is really a European country and argue that Turkey should not be admitted in the European Union because “they lack a Christian identity.” (Cameron 2004). Some people think that Europe is a club of Christian nations; therefore, an Islamic country should not be accepted as a member of the European Union. According to the official statistics, about 99% of Turkish population is Muslim, “the majority of whom are Sunni.” (US Department of State 2004). Turkey’s predominantly Muslim nature is one of the reasons for popular opposition to Turkey’s integration into the European Union. Due to large number of conflict in the Middle East, Europeans think that the accession of Turkey to the EU will cause the emergence of religious extremism and fundamentalism. (Clesse 2004). However, Europeans should take into account that unlike some Middle Eastern countries, Turkey is not run by strict religious laws, and the Turkish government opposes Islamic fundamentalism. Turkey is a tolerant country, and non-Muslim communities feel safe and protected by Turkish constitution. Turkey has chosen a pro-Western path and has a western style political and economic system based on limited government and separation of powers.

The constitution of Turkey provides for freedom of religion and the Turkish government respects the rights of non-Muslim people and national minorities. Like most of the European countries, Turkey is a democratic republic, and freedom rights and advancements may surprise many Europeans who hold the view that Turkey is too different. Turkey is a modern, western-style secular nation-state which displays the trappings of a western-style democratic government. It is a successful example of combining Islamic institutions with secular and democratic institutions. Turkey is a good

example to prove that Islam is not an obstacle to democratic development. However, things could change if Turkey will be left outside the gates of the European Union. It could have negative consequences and could hinder the democratization process in the country. It is in the interests of the European Union to transform Turkey into a stable, prosperous and democratic country and accept it as its full member. The membership of Turkey in the EU will accelerate the economic, political and social reforms in this country. The passage to membership will provide a stimulus to complete these democratic reforms. Without full membership in the EU, Turkey could be tempted to turn east and maintain close relations with non-democratic and totalitarian countries. In this case, European countries may lose a strategic ally and partner in Asia Minor. If Turkey succeeds in meeting the Copenhagen Criteria and adapting to European standards during the next decades, then they should definitely become a full member of the European Union. According to Dr. Cengiz and Dr. Hoffman, the European Union is not a club of Christian nations, but rather a union of like-minded countries that try to achieve common economic and political objectives. (House of Commons 2012, 101). The old prejudices against Turkey, mainly based on religion and identity, are still very present and widespread in the European countries. The reinvigoration of accession talks and building closer links with Turkey could help Europeans to develop tolerant attitudes towards people of different religions and modify a very skeptical public opinion on Muslims. The refusal to accept Turkey in the EU on religious and cultural grounds could be disastrous for Europe. The “Clash of civilizations” could be avoided and tensions between the West and Islamic World could be diminished by admitting Turkey in the European Union (Timmerman and Mels 2008). Integration of Turkey in the European Union will provide the incentive for other Muslim nations to carry out democratic reforms. In this case Turkey could become a model of democratization for all Muslim countries in the Middle East. It could constitute a model for the Muslim World and it could play a decisive role in spreading freedom, democracy and prosperity in its neighborhood. (Akçapar 2006).

CONCLUSION

The European Union has the capacity to absorb Turkey. Turkey’s integration into European Union should not be seen as a dangerous process. On the contrary, Europeans should be aware of positive aspects of integration of Turkey in the EU. In the long run, the admission of Turkey could have a positive impact on European Union. The Europe could reap benefits from Turkish membership:

1. Turkish membership could increase the economic potential of the European Union and could make Europe more competitive on the global arena. Turkey is no longer “a sick man of Europe”, and it experiences rapid economic growth over the last years. Furthermore, immigration from Turkey could help to mitigate the effects of the falling population. Economic growth is impossible to achieve during times of demographic crisis and labor shortage. Never in history has there been economic growth without population growth. Turkey with its large population and large human resources could alleviate demographic problems in Europe.
2. Turkey is a bridge between Europe and Asia. The European Union needs Turkey in order to intensify economic, cultural and trade relations with the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asian Countries and China. Turkey can play a vital role in

reviving the Silk Road and could contribute greatly to economic, cultural and social development of Europe. Over the last years, Turkey has become an energy hub, and after the construction of oil and gas pipelines its strategic significance has increased considerably. Turkey plays very important role in the transportation of hydrocarbons, especially natural gas and oil, to Europe. The EU needs Turkey to reduce its dependence on aggressive and unpredictable Russia. Ukrainian crisis proved that Russia is an unreliable partner and the European Union has to develop a Southern Gas Corridor in order to reduce its dependence on Russia. The new energy export infrastructure could be built through Anatolia, and Turkey could play a significant role as an energy transit state.

3. Turkey could become a successful example of democratization for other Muslim states. Turkey could prove that Islamic values are compatible with liberal-democratic values. Nowadays, Turkey is the only Muslim democracy. (Lewis 1994). But the number of Muslim democracies could increase considerably if Turkey becomes the member of the European Union and joins the club of liberal democratic countries.

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