

‘A few important aspects of Turkey’s uneasiness towards the EU’ from the Europe Daily Bulletin (11 January 2005)

Caption: On 11 January 2005, Ferdinando Riccardi, Editor-in-Chief of Agence Europe in Brussels, identifies the contradictory attitudes of the Turkish leaders towards their country’s possible accession to the European Union.

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A few important aspects of Turkey's uneasiness towards the EU

Reforms undertaken willingly, or imposed reforms? The considerations developed in this column last week should lead us to question whether accession to the EU is the best solution for Turkey itself. Having won out on their first priority demand- setting a date for negotiations to open- the Turkish authorities may well conclude that the sovereignty-sharing implicit in accession exceeds what is acceptable or desirable for their country, politically as well as psychologically or culturally.

A certain amount of uneasiness, to put it mildly, was already clear from the events surrounding the positive decision of the European Council. The debates of Turkey's national Great Assembly on the new civil code showed observers that various changes and additions were brought in by the legislators somewhat half-heatedly, with a view to meeting European requirements. The criminalisation of female adultery was only dropped because of the strength of reaction on the part of the EU, which made it a prerequisite. This episode lent weight to the words of Günter Verheugen (which were then taken up by other political decision-makers), to the effect that any refusal to open negotiations would have led to an immediate block on all the reforms: wave goodbye to the great and praiseworthy attempts to modernise and move towards European values! If the EU negotiator is right, this casts doubt on the sincerity and long-term intentions of Turkey's reforms.

A question of tone. The behaviour of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has caused similar worries. Already the tone of his interview with the French daily "*Le Monde*" of 9 December was rather difficult, punctuated by a series of "no's" (to the recognition of Cyprus, to the hypothetical "open negotiations" with the EU with no outcome fixed in advance), or dictatorial "we wants". Then, speaking before the European Heads of Government, Mr Erdogan was so aggressive about Cyprus that the current President of the Foreign Affairs Council, Jean Asselborn, was quite flabbergasted, which he did not hide from the press, to whom he described Mr Erdogan's tone as confrontational: "*to hear him, jaws were hitting the floor*". This wasn't just a gut reaction on the part of the Luxembourg minister, because two weeks later, he confirmed his views to a journalist who invited him to retract his comments, describing Mr Erdogan's address as "aggressive and unacceptable": "*It was my first European Council, and I felt his approach was wrong. And so I spoke out against it*" (see our bulletin of 23 December, p.4). The European Heads of Government glossed over this episode, but now needed a rapid solution to the Cyprus problem, taking the view that it was unthinkable to open accession negotiations with a country which does not recognise one of the Member States and is occupying one part of it with military force (even though the Greek Gypriots must carry a share of the blame in this situation).

Implications of the Kurdish problem. The problem of the 200,000 Turks living in Cyprus pretty much fades into insignificance alongside the business with the Kurds. The enthusiastic support of 5 million Turkish Kurds to joining the EU is doubtless motivated by the improvement of their fate, status and autonomy (politically and culturally) which would ensue from Turkey's application of European criteria for minority rights. This could rule out that aspirations for a unified Kurdistan, bringing together territory now split up between Turkey, Iraq and Iran, is no longer at the forefront of their minds, especially if it is later confirmed that the Iraqi Kurds are moving closer to autonomy day by day (shored up by oilfields?). Of course, the chancelleries don't want to hear about this, either in Ankara (understandably) or elsewhere, and the Turkish military circles continue to hang back, maintaining a careful silence. But these same circles have let it be known that their discretion will not go so far as to allow "national security" to be compromised. On the one hand, downsizing the role of the army is imperative in a fully functioning democracy, in application of the "Copenhagen Criteria"; on the other, the army has played an important part in guaranteeing the secularity of the Turkish State. In democracy, the people decide, that's a given; but this is no reason to forget the choice the Algerian people were making and how the secularity of the State was safeguarded in that instance (even though nobody likes to talk about it). A recent publication by the association "*Notre Europe*", which was written by professors Jean Marcou (a French lecturer at the University of Cairo) and Deniz Vardar (of the University of Marmara, in Turkey) speaks of "*the comments of certain members of the military staff about the impatience of various sections of the army with governmental policy and European recommendations*". These words, "*which are neither confirmed nor denied at high official levels, reflect the concerns of the army (...). It must accept a reduction in its political role to meet the requirements of its*

candidacy. This gives rise to the feeling (...) that the Europeans are playing with fire by encroaching upon national independence". The same comment was put more clearly and with more punch in the little book by Sylvie Goulart, "*The Great Turk and the Republic of Venice*" (which I have already quoted in this column): (our translation): "by calling for the power of the army within Turkish society to be reduced, the EU is playing an unclear role: on the one hand, it is- rightly- encouraging democracy, as military power has no legitimacy; on the other, it is sapping secularity, as the army has the greatest commitment to its defence".

Genuine secularity or a sham? We can see the contradiction. Where does the majority of the Turkish population stand on secularity? The assessment of Doctor Otmar Oehring, director of the "human rights" section of the international mission Katolisches Missionwerke of Aachen, was highly negative, further to his investigations on the ground. In a debate organised by COMECE (Commission of the Bishops' Conference of the European Community) on 18 November, Mr Oehring said that in Turkey at present, secularity "*exists on paper, but in practice, the State is Islamic*". Various laws are secular, but society is not (even if a section of the population would like it to be). Freedom of religion is an illusion, because non-Islamic religious communities are apparently discriminated against. In this field, the result of Turkish reforms "*was zero*".

COMECE, it is true, has an axe to grind, and the facts must be checked. Here is one element. To the best of my knowledge, the 31st session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, which took place in Ankara in June 2004 and approved a sizeable final communiqué, received very little coverage in Europe. Paragraph 62 of the communiqué reads: "*The Conference calls for an end to the unjustified campaigns (...) which demand the abolition of Sharia laws and penalties in the name of human rights protection. It affirms the right of States to uphold their religious, social and cultural idiosyncrasies (...). The universality of human rights must not be used as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of States and flout their national sovereignty. The Conference condemns the decision of the European Union to denounce stoning as a penalty, and what it calls inhumane punishments meted out by some Member States in compliance with Islamic Sharia*". I take all this with a pinch of salt, because I do not know whether the original text was correctly translated into English, or whether the Turkish delegation entered a reservation on the above passage. But all the same, it is bizarre to accuse Europe of being a "Christian club" (which it isn't) when the Organization of the Islamic States well and truly exists. These States quite obviously have the right to uphold their idiosyncrasies, but some of the Sharia "idiosyncrasies" are incompatible with European values.

Turkey's role in Asia. As for Turkey's policy in the Turkish-speaking Republics of the former USSR (Azerbaijan, Kirghikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), it has no military dimension and no vague territorial ambitions. But is the job of the Tika government agency to "promote the Turkish model", establish a common alphabet and language, support media and communication projects, etc, and bilateral agreements with Turkish-speaking countries include dual nationality (local and Turkish), subject to certain conditions; this will affect 60 million people world-wide. These are legal and correct actions, and, what is more, they are quite natural and logical from Ankara's point of view, but they appear to confirm Turkey's intentions of playing an autonomous role in this part of the world, which will be difficult to reconcile with the future objectives of CFSP and ESDP. The economic stakes, starting with the transportation of oil from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean and Europe, are enormous. It may well be in the EU's interests to get involved, but Turkey may find it inconvenient to apply Community rules in this field... From a political point of view, being an autonomous bridge between Europe and these regions, as far as the heart of Asia, could be more attractive to Turkey than becoming a member of the EU.

A further element is worthy of reflection: Turkey's official procedure, between Christmas and the New year, rejecting the possibility decided on by the European Council of permanent safeguard measures in the fields of free movement of persons, agriculture and structural policies. The EU "*must not expect us to agree to exceptional measures with no limits upon the duration and objectives*". It is perfectly understandable for differences of opinion to exist at the start of long negotiations- otherwise, what would be the point of negotiating? But this provision was an essential element of the compromise arrived at by the EU. I add that Mr Denktash described as "absolutely out of the question" their recognition of the Republic of Cyprus before negotiations on Turkish accession open, possibly even before accession. Overall, statements made by Ankara have blown hot and cold. The Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül said that with negotiations to accede to the EU, Turkey was throwing itself into "*a process of complete transformation, a total change of mindset*".

and standards". Is this also the opinion of the Prime Minister and the majority of the population?

(Ferdinando Riccardi)