

Is the EU reaching the limits of enlargement?

Written by James Chisem

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JAMES CHISEM, JUN 20 2011

It is arguable that the dynamism with which the states of the EU have proceeded with enlargement and integration, has been unparalleled in the history of International Relations. Since its inception in 1951 the EU, which originally entailed a modest agreement on coal and steel production, has evolved into a supranational politico-economic union with its own institutions, jurisdictions, currency and values[1]. The addition of new member states has been central to this expansion – the ‘*Big Bang*’ enlargement of 2004 which (along with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007) incorporated ex-Soviet Republics (*CEEC*) was instrumental in altering the nature and scope of the project[2]. However, in recent years support for eastward enlargement has lost momentum in both public and policy realms – opening up a debate over the concept of Europe itself[3]. The question of Turkish accession in particular, on hold since 1987[4], has proved to be a crystallising point for many of the fundamental issues concerning *widening* in the 21st century[5].

This essay will demonstrate that the prospect of further EU enlargement, in the context of Turkey, has become increasingly limited due to two primary factors. Firstly, expansion beyond Europe’s traditional borders is made problematic by perceived political, economic and cultural divergence. Secondly, opposition from the Franco-German nexus presents a challenge to Turkish accession and enlargement in general.

The discourse will be structured in a three fold manner. The first section will examine the economic dimensions of enlargement. Section two will deal with the contentious issue of political culture in the EU-Turkey question. The final section will focus on EU institutions and the prospects of Turkish integration.

i) The Economic Dimensions of Further Enlargement

The requirement for potential member states to mirror the macroeconomic trends displayed within the EU has been central to enlargement policy – these trends are identified by the *Copenhagen Criteria* as the “*existence of a functioning market economy*” and the “*capacity to cope with the competitive pressures and market forces within the Union*”[6]. More generally, according to Sjursen, it must be demonstrated that a candidate’s addition to the Union would “*help maintain and reinforce the economic prosperity and physical security of EU citizens*”.[7]

There are a number of indicators which suggest should the Turkish economy be incorporated into the common market, the harmonisation process would be relatively smooth and not dissimilar to the experience of the 2004 enlargement round[8]. Since the 1980 military coup, successive Turkish governments have demonstrated a willingness to pursue internal and external liberalisation of anachronistic industrial and financial structures, in line with the 1963 *Ankara Agreement*[9]. Under the guidance of the IMF Turkey has abolished price controls, integrated its financial markets into the global economy and vigorously executed the privatisation of state economic enterprises such as *Turkish Telecom*[10]. These economic reforms have allowed Turkey to achieve high annual growth rates of 5-6% and enhanced the competitiveness of Turkish companies operating in Europe[11]. The auto-industry is a particularly positive example of this. In the 1980s it had been a state owned enterprise, hostile to liberalisation and the removal of tariff barriers. Presently, the restructured industry has expanded its remit and increased partnerships with foreign *MNCs* such as *Renault* and *Toyota*[12].

The EU-Turkish Customs Union (which prohibits industrial tariffs on EU goods), in effect since 1995, signifies the

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capacity of Turkish politico-economic structures to integrate with existing EU institutions, standards and markets[13]. Indeed, Turkey has become one of the EU's most important trading partners in relation to both imports and exports – acting as a gateway to markets in the Middle East and Eurasia[14]. According to the *Functionalist* theorist Ernst Haas, this economic interpenetration should produce a *spill-over* effect, leading to cooperation and integration in other sectors – making Turkish accession both easier and beneficial[15].

Despite the impressive improvements that the Turkish economy has made in the past 30 years, there remain problematic features of this model (and the economic model of developing nations in general). The sustainability of Turkish debt, which accounts for 89% of the GDP, is a central concern for EU policymakers. As the majority of this debt is held in foreign exchange and subject to high inflation, the public finances are sensitive to market fluctuations[16]. The complex patronage based synergy between sectional interest groups and the state further compounds Turkey's fiscal instability. It encourages the existence of extra-budgetary funds – entities which allow the accumulation of an invisible public debt[17]. It is unlikely that such high levels of indebtedness combined with dubious monetary policy will be tolerated by the core EU members (*EU15*), given their reaction to similar conditions in Greece[18].

Turkish accession also has significant implications for resource distribution within the EU. The Turkish agricultural sector is far larger than that of any of the current EU member states, comprising 14% of GDP and providing 33% of overall employment. As Turkey would be obliged to adopt the *Common Agricultural Policy* it would receive substantial levels of subsidies[19]. In tandem with uniquely low *Foreign Direct Investment*[20] and comparative inequality with existing EU states, this would, according to Flam, make Turkey “the largest net recipient from the EU budget”[21]. Moreover, the average income in the EU is threefold that of Turkey[22]. There is concern amongst the EU15 that this, combined with other factors, will lead to mass scale immigration which would lower wages, increase unemployment and cause social unrest[23]. Germany, with its large Turkish *diaspora*, is particularly perceptive of this issue[24].

It is therefore apparent that there is a marked macroeconomic asymmetry which demarcates Turkey from the *E15* and *CEEC*. Ultimately this “clash of economic interests between a lower middle income economy...and the wealthy industrialised nations of Western Europe”[25], as Richard Adams of *The Guardian* described it, problematises Turkish accession and the prospect of EU expansion into developing nations in general.

ii) Political Culture: Bridges and Barriers

Liberal Democracy is the fundamental political concept upon which the EU is constructed, being enshrined in *article 6* of the *Treaty on the European Union*[26]. The *Copenhagen Criteria* further elucidates the necessity for potential member states to promote the “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”[27]. This was key in providing leverage for the swift transformation of the *CEEC* from authoritarian bureaucracies to functioning democracies within a period of 10 years. Accordingly, it has had a similar impact on the internal dynamics of Turkey[28].

Confounding the predictions of some analysts, the ruling Islamist AKP has not sought to challenge the secular foundations of the Turkish state[29]. The Prime Minister Recep Erdogan has displayed a commitment to EU accession and pursued a programme of legislative and judicial reform, building upon that of his predecessors, aimed at bringing Turkish democracy in line with EU norms[30]. Reforms designed to reduce police powers of detention and streamline the prosecution of state representatives accused of corruption have been relatively successful[31]. The abolition of the death penalty in 2002 and the easing of restrictions on minority languages are examples used by proponents of enlargement to highlight the speed and credibility with which the Turkish political culture is converging with *Europeanised* democracy[32]. Moreover, the AKP has made concrete manoeuvres to curtail the fusion of military and state – a particular anxiety of the *EU Commission* – by altering the balance of the powerful *National Security Council* to give civilian ministers a majority[33]. It has been widely hypothesised that this progress is a direct result of the EU accession criteria, and as such enlargement should be pursued with vigour, in order to consolidate democratic institutions within Turkey and the wider region. Richard Hewitt, a Labour Party MEP, elaborated upon this by suggesting that “the EU, which entrenched democracy in eastern Europe, will now do so in Turkey”[34].

Is the EU reaching the limits of enlargement?

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However, it would be premature to suggest that the “*undemocratic characteristics of the strong state tradition*” have been vanquished by the prospect of EU membership[35]. Many of the reforms enacted since 2000 exist on paper only. Serious concerns continue to be raised over the human rights violations committed by the Turkish state, specifically (although not exclusively) in relation to its minority Kurdish population[36]. It is estimated that there are 2 million displaced Kurds within Turkey whose situation “*remains critical, with many living in precarious conditions*” – little has been done to provide security or legal redress for these refugees[37]. Furthermore, the draconian *Anti Terror Law* is regularly utilised in order to stifle criticism of the government[38]. Academics who have published articles critical of the Turkish stance on the *Armenian genocide* have been imprisoned for lengthy periods[39] – this policy has generated tension with EU nations, most recently France and Sweden, who have questioned Turkey’s compatibility with European values of freedom of expression and pluralism[40]. The *EU Commission* and numerous *NGOs* have identified this and the ongoing use of torture by the Turkish authorities as evidence of the slow pace of *democratisation* and as a barrier to integration with EU regimes[41]. The ever present tension between the Kemalist military establishment and the Islamist AKP (highlighted by recent allegations of a planned coup d’état)[42], which undermines the stability and credibility of Turkey’s democratic institutions, serves to further erode support for enlargement from EU member states[43].

It is clear that Turkish political culture deviates significantly from that espoused, codified and practised by the *EU15* and *CEEC*. According to the RAND Corporation this failure to meet the *Copenhagen Criteria* “*more than anything else has complicated Turkey’s efforts to achieve EU membership*”, threatening to stall the enlargement process[44].

iii) Institutions and Perception : Altering the Balance

The perusal of enlargement in regards to Turkey has important repercussions for the EU decision making process and the balance of power within EU institutions. Although normative considerations are not covered by the strictly procedural Copenhagen Criteria, they play an important role in informing the attitude of member states toward enlargement. Turkey’s comparatively large size means that its accession would have a greater impact than that of the CEEC in 2004 and 2007[45].

If demographic trends continue on their current trajectory, Turkey will surpass Germany as the most populous European nation in 2020 – becoming a central component of an enlarged EU[46]. This poses a number of problems for the Franco-German constituency. The fact that Turkey will have the largest number of *MEPs* in the *European Parliament*[47] has engendered widespread disquiet over the development of an inbuilt (Islamic influenced) conservative bias within that institution, which could halt progress in minority and gender equality[48]. Enlargement would also tilt power distribution in favour of the poorer states – increasing their voting weight in the *European Council*, giving them more power to set the EU agenda and block Franco-German initiatives[49]. Browne suggests that such a paradigm shift is likely to generate opposition from the core EU members;

“it is unrealistic that a country resembling a developing rather than a developed nation would have more say on the EU’s policy and decision making structures than the older members such as Germany”[50]

In addition there is suspicion amongst French and German policymakers that British support for Turkish membership is motivated by a desire to “*slow dramatically, if not reverse, further EU integration*”[51]. Operating within this context von Rompuy (the newly elected *President of the European Council*), whose critics have alleged has “*only two bosses; Merkel and Sarkozy*”, has signalled a move toward deeper integration and consolidation, rather than widening[52].

Conclusion

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The contentious relationship between the EU and Turkey has been characterised by asymmetry in perception and expectations. Although steps have been taken to *Europeanise* its socio-economic structure, a considerable gap remains between the objective conditions within Turkey and the *Copenhagen Criteria*. France and Germany are staunchly opposed to Turkish accession as it is seen as contrary to their interests, public opinion and the success of vertical integration. Consequently, the scope for Turkish membership of the EU is severely limited by structural, cultural and institutional factors. This has important implications for further enlargement in general. The dialectic between developing nations and developed nations, liberal democracies and emerging democracies and the direction of the European project will be central to the enlargement debate as the EU stands at the crossroads of expanding outside of its traditional borders.

However, there have been relatively lengthy periods in history in which the EU has eschewed further expansion. The accession of the southern states in the 1980s and the *CEEC* in 2004 and 2007 were both questioned on economic and political grounds and both garnered vocal opposition from the EU establishment[53]. It would be premature to suggest that enlargement, be it in the Balkans or Eurasia, has reached its limits on the basis of the present geopolitical situation. As Robert Schumann speculated in 1950 "*Europe will not be made all at once, nor in a single holistic construction. It will be built by concrete achievements that will create solidarity in facts*"[54].

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