

REGIONAL POLITICS

**A TURKIC ALLIANCE:
POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE
TO TURKEY'S UNREALIZED
EU MEMBERSHIP?**

Pavel VARBANETS

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
fellow at the Institute of World Economics and
International Relations,
National Academy of
Sciences of Ukraine
(Kiev, Ukraine)*

For many years now the Turkish political elite has been convinced that the country's EU membership would be the logical conclusion to the modernization processes launched by Kemal Atatürk. Until recently this trend was vehemently opposed only by the extreme right nationalists, who had no real popular support inside the country. The Turkish Islamists, on the other hand, have not merely moved away from their traditional opposition to Europe, they have grasped the advantages of European integration that promised to relieve them of the rigid control imposed by the military.¹

¹ See: O. Roy, *Turkey Today: A European Nation?* London, 2005, p. 2.

Its firm dedication to EU membership has been keeping the ruling pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party in power for over six years. European integration remains the pivot of the country's foreign policy course. The recent decisions of France and Austria to put the Turkish question up for discussion at national referendums nearly buried Turkey's prospects for EU membership. Sooner or later the Turks will have to accept the fact that they should look for their foreign policy pivots elsewhere.

Close cultural and historical ties and common economic interests make the Turkic world a logical choice.

Why Turkey will Never Become an EU Member

On 4 October, 2005 Turkey and the European Union began their official talks on Turkey's EU membership. Today, more than three years later the Turkish leaders are still resolved to meet all the requirements. Recently the Foreign Ministry of this country said that EU membership was a strategic aim. "We are fully determined to implement the political and economic criteria."² With each passing year, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that EU membership will remain forever outside Turkey's reach for cultural, economic and political reasons. On top of this, the recent eastward expansion of the European Union has already created numerous domestic problems for it.

On the whole Turkey is facing two groups of problems that keep it outside the EU. All candidates are expected, first, to modernize their economic, political, and legal systems to adjust them to the EU membership criteria in order to minimize the cost and risks for the European Union.³ These criteria were laid down at the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen and the 1995 European Council in Essen. Some of the key EU integration criteria were also entered into the 1995 White Book of the European Commission. A country may claim EU membership only when it has attained the standards. The second group of factors is of a purely subjective nature: the civilizational, cultural, historical, and geographic specifics and the complexity of the EU domestic situation. While the first group of problems can be removed through gradual and consistent adaptation to the EU criteria, the candidate-country is powerless to do anything about the second group.

- The **first group** comprises economic and social issues: so far, Turkey's economic development level remains far below that of the EU members. The EU candidates should achieve a high level of economic development, political democracy, and social standards (income, consumption structure, living standards, and employment), otherwise they will never gain access to the European labor, goods, and services markets and will never create a sizable middle class. Adaptation to the European agricultural requirements is Turkey's most challenging task. According to experts, the European Union will have to pay €11.3 billion to adjust Turkish agriculture to the European standards, more than it was needed to integrate the agricultural sectors of the ten EU new members that joined it in 2004. In Turkey, agriculture employs 36 percent of the able-bodied population (about 8 million) while the EU agricultural sector employs 6.5 million.⁴

The level of democracy in Turkey presents another difficulty: it is a democratic yet authoritarian country in which the military controls the entire political system.⁵ In recent years Turkey has amended its Constitution and legislation in the most radical way; it gave freedom to all ethnic minorities, banned capital punishment, and trimmed the powers of the military. The National Security Council, for example, lost some of its powers as a result of the amendments of 17 October, 2001 while Art 143 of the Constitution (on State Security Courts) was annulled. The European Commission ruled that, on the whole, Turkey corresponded to the Copenhagen criteria even though there was room for certain improvements.

² [<http://www.iht.com/articles/reuters/2008/11/05/europe/OUKW-UK-EU-ENLARGEMENT.php>].

³ See: H. Arikian, *Turkey and the EU: An Awkward Candidate for EU Membership?* Burlington, 2003, p. 9.

⁴ See: G. Druzenko, "Evropeiskaia integratsiia: ravnenie na Velikobritaniiu i Turtsiiu," *Zerkalo nedeli*, 16-29 July, 2005.

⁵ See: O. Roy, op. cit., p. 4.

Turkey has found it hard to adapt its legislation to the European standards; the expert community believes that it will take it from 10 to 15 years to correlate Turkey's national legislation to European (described on approximately 88 thousand pages).

- The **second group** primarily comprises geographical factors: the country's vast (by European standards) territory and population strength. Turkey covers a territory of 775.3 thousand sq km, which means that it is larger than France (544 thousand sq km), Spain (505 thousand sq km), and Germany (356.3 thousand sq km). Today its population amounts to about 70 million people. This means that its territory and population are much larger than those of any of the recent EU members and are too close to those of the EU leaders. Turkey's population size puts it in second place after Germany.⁶ The Turkish experts have recognized that the size of their country and its potentially negative impact on the European Union are two of the reasons why Brussels deems it necessary to approach the issue in a special way.⁷

Turkey's vast population and its relative poverty present the threat of uncontrolled labor migration. The country is the source of a considerable number of migrants while the European public is highly skeptical about their integration ability.⁸

Likewise, the laws of the European Union are ill-suited to Turkey's population size: the number of seats in the European Parliament depends on the population size, which means that as an EU member Turkey will acquire one of the largest factions and, therefore, a lot of political weight.

The European public has its doubts about the country's civilizational and cultural makeup. EU membership entails recognition of the system of values shared by all members and registered in the Paris Charter of 1990 and the Maastricht Agreement of 1992. In the context of unfolding globalization it has become extremely important for the states and the European community as a whole to share common values in order to be able to carry their responsibilities and address all the problems. Turkey is a country with a different mentality, different traditions, and different values. It is a Muslim country with a large number of problems rooted in its history: the Cyprus and Armenian questions as well as the far from simple relations with Greece.

The situation is even more complicated than that: the public of many EU members is dead set against Turkey's EU membership. In fact the Turkish question has already provoked a crisis inside the community. France and the Netherlands rejected the European Constitution mainly because the results of the EU expansion proved disappointing. Sociological polls in Denmark revealed that 62.8 percent of the country's population did not want to see Turkey in the EU; these sentiments are shared by the populations of France, Austria, and Cyprus. According to the latest opinion polls, 74 percent of Austrians refuse to accept Turkey as a European state; approximately the same share believes that there are too many cultural differences. A meager 5 percent of Austrians are prepared to hail Turkey as a new EU member, in France the share is 22 percent, and in Cyprus it reaches 19 percent of the respondents.⁹

The EU members never ignore public opinion: some of the states have already announced that the question of Turkey's EU membership will be put up for discussion at a referendum. France has already adopted a new law under which EU membership for new members will be decided by national referendums. Austria followed suit. Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel stated several times that the Turks could count on privileged partnership and nothing more. The global economic crisis made Turkey's European future even vaguer than before.

⁶ See: *Turkey and Central and Eastern European Countries in Transition: Towards Membership of the EU*, ed. by S. Togan, V.N. Balasubramanyam, New York, 2001, p. 9.

⁷ See: H. Arikian, *op. cit.*

⁸ See: O. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁹ See: *Die Presse*, 18 August, 2008.

Will Turkey Turn to the East?

If the European Union persists in keeping Turkey at arm's length the Turkish establishment might revise its attitude toward EU membership. The nationalist-minded groups very much disappointed with Ankara's European integration efforts and their results have been demonstrating a lot of discontent. In May 2008 while an EU delegation visited Turkey a huge anti-integration rally was held in the country's capital. Tens of thousands of students and members of public organizations flocked to Ankara from all sides to chant "We are soldiers of Atatürk" and "The Turkish youth is for an independent secular Turkey and against its European membership." The rally called on the government to boycott the talks with the European Union that endangered Turkey's national interests.¹⁰

It can be expected that as public disappointment with the EU gradually builds the calls for integration with the Turkic world, in which Ankara is the leader, will resound much louder than today. In the future the presumed alliance of Turkic states might become a welcome alternative to EU membership. The country is strong enough economically to claim regional leadership. Since 2002 its GDP had been demonstrating steady growth and has never been below 7 percent; in 2007 it was \$400 billion, which placed Turkey among the top 20 most developed countries. It aspires to emulate the "Asian tigers" or even to leave them behind.¹¹

Turkey is working hard to become a large regional actor; this is confirmed at the summits between the Turkish leaders and heads of Central Asian and Mid-Eastern states as well as by its increased involvement in the OIC.

In the 1990s Turkey relied mainly on emotions in Central Asia; today it demonstrates much more balanced approaches to integration and cooperation. The Turkish leaders are convinced that the Turkic republics should draw closer together in the economic and cultural spheres. They point to the European Union as an example of successful integration that started with economic issues and gradually moved to common political institutions and structures. An alliance of the Turkic-speaking states as a weighty factor in international policy is Turkey's final aim (after the stage of economic unification had been completed). The events of 2007 and 2008 showed that Turkey has already moved in this direction; its specific steps testified that Ankara drew on EU experience to build up the administrative and organizational backbone of the new structure.

To translate the idea into reality Turkey is following several routes:

- (1) a single energy basin independent of Russia that will give the Central Asian republics direct access to the European markets; Turkey will reserve the role of the main transit route for itself;
- (2) more active business communications and a single communication system for the region in order to ensure greater trade turnover and closer personal contacts among the leaders of individual countries and at the grass-root level;
- (3) cooperation in language and culture leading to a common ideology of Turkic-Islamic integration;
- (4) a gradually increasing emphasis on political integration patterned on the European Union.

Recently, Turkey has been doing much more than before to develop business relations with Eurasian countries; direct Turkish private investments in the region have topped \$8 billion; Turkish contractors are implementing over 1,700 projects in Eurasian countries totaling \$35 billion.

¹⁰ See: A. Guriev, "Situatsiia v Turtsii," April 2008, Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 4 May, 2008, available at [<http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2008/04-05-08.htm>].

¹¹ See: V. Piskovyi, "Tretia religiia Turtsii," *Zerkalo nedeli*, 12-18 January, 2008.

Turkey is claiming the role of the region's "power exchange": it had already monopolized the power routes from the East to the West (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline alone moves 50 million tons of crude oil a year).¹² In 2007 Kazakhstan signed an agreement on joining the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline system, a great factor of Turkish energy policy in the region. Contrary to America's condemnation of Turkey's cooperation with Iran, it is continuing to pursue this avenue. Late in 2007 the two countries signed an agreement on modernizing the power lines of both countries totaling \$1 billion.¹³ Today, Turkey moves up to 40 billion cu m of gas to Europe and 300 million tons of oil to international markets. In the near future the figures will be even higher if the gas export projects to Europe (the Interconnector, together with Italy and Greece, and Nabucco, together with Bulgaria and Rumania) will be a success.

The project of a railway linking Kars, Tbilisi, and Baku, which is expected to be completed by 2011, will supply the region with a single communication system; it will carry 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of goods.¹⁴ This railway will connect the less developed part of Turkey with Azerbaijan and Georgia; it will make it easier to move freight and engage in organized trade with Azerbaijan; later the railway will reach Central Asia.

International Turkic kurultais can be described as the first step in the cultural and political spheres toward a "common Turkic model." The first of them was held on 21 March, 1993; devised as international congresses of public organizations of the Turkic states and communities from all over the world they were synchronized with summits of the Turkic states. This idea belonged to Turgut Özal, the eighth president of Turkey. The first summit held on 30-31 October in 1992 in Ankara was attended by the top figures of the Turkic states. The Justice and Development Party, which came to power in 2002, abandoned the idea, however in 2006 the Islamists revived the kurultais and concentrated on the Turkic trend as the key one in their foreign policy.¹⁵

The tenth kurultai (2006) was especially important. From that time on Turkey switched from declarations to practical steps. It was the first kurultai to be attended by top officials, including the prime minister of Turkey and president of Azerbaijan. Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan called on the meeting to set up a Commonwealth of Turkic-Speaking Nations to prepare "conditions for economic integration and thus make it possible to express a unified view on the global scene." He said further: "History has given us a unique opportunity for unifying the efforts of our countries with their common culture and historical roots. We'll either become a subject of global policy or remain an object." He called on the Turkic states (Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in particular) to present a common front in the energy sphere. He described the transnational energy routes (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum) as a firm foundation for joint actions of the Turkic states and communities.¹⁶

The next kurultai (the Congress of Friendship, Brotherhood and Cooperation of the Turkic-Speaking States and Communities) that met in Baku on 17-19 November, 2007 confirmed that regional integration had good prospects. The forum was attended by 550 representatives and guests from 30 countries: Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, Tajikistan, Mongolia, and others. President of Azerbaijan İlham Aliev, Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Erdoğan, and former president of Turkey Süleyman Demirel, as well as top members of state structures of the Turkic countries, opened the congress.

¹² See: *Ibidem*.

¹³ See: *Zaman*, 18 December, 2007.

¹⁴ See: *Hurriyet*, 24 July, 2008.

¹⁵ See: A. Guriev, "Ankara ukrepliaet tiurkskii faktor svoei vneshnei politiki," Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 22 March, 2008, available at [<http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2008/22-03-08.htm>].

¹⁶ [<http://www.rpmonitor.ru/en/en/detail.php?ID=2332>].

The forum recommended that a relevant conception for establishing the Union of Turkic-Speaking Countries should be formulated, set up a Permanent Secretariat of the Heads of Turkish-speaking States, and planned joint events dealing with problems of the Turkic people.

The congress participants agreed to create a common alphabet for all the Turkic-speaking countries in cooperation with the Academies of Sciences of the Turkic world. It was advised that a Parliamentary Assembly be set up to cover the area where Turkic people live; and it was decided to set up an Economic Union of Turkic-Speaking Countries analogous to OPEC.

The idea of a Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic-speaking Countries took root: on 21-22 February, 2008 the vice-speakers of the parliaments of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan came to Antalya in Turkey for the first meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly. The meeting signed the Protocol on setting up the Assembly; it also drafted the Charter. According to the documents the Assembly, with a rotating chairmanship of twelve months in alphabetical order, will meet at least once a year. The official languages of the member states will be accepted as the Assembly's working languages.¹⁷

The draft Charter described the following aims:

- Development of cooperation between the parliaments of the member states;
- Organizational support for summits of the Turkic-speaking countries;
- Elaboration of common political views and organization of joint events;
- Exchange of law-making experience and accommodation of national legislations;
- Joint legislation work designed to preserve the common history, art, and literature of the Turkic-speaking peoples and their heritage and values in all other spheres;
- Setting up mechanisms adequate to the formulated aims.¹⁸

Under Art 12, the Agreement was opened for signing by the legislatures of all the Turkic-speaking states and enters into force if ratified by at least three parliaments.

The document came into force on 21 November, 2008 at the Conference of the Parliament Speakers of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic-Speaking Countries in Istanbul when Chairman of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey Koksal Toptan, Chairman of the Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan Ogtai Asadov, Chairman of Zhogorku Kenesh (parliament of Kyrgyzstan) Aitibai Tagaev, and Deputy Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan Mukhambet Kopeev signed it.

President of Turkey Abdullah Gül took part in the official opening ceremony together with the people enumerated above and informed the meeting that a Council of Aksakkals (Elders) would be set up.

The conference decided that the Parliamentary Assembly would receive a Secretariat; these efforts would be continued at the Baku summit scheduled for the beginning of 2009.¹⁹

The above events testify to the fact that integration of the Turkic-speaking states is going on and has been accelerated on Turkey's initiative. Ankara prefers to move gradually toward the desired aim. It should be said here that the European Union took several years to achieve its present format and that integration is a fairly painful, complex, and long process. Something has been already achieved: Turkmenistan, which the previous year had a negative attitude toward the idea of a union of Turkic states, is much better disposed. This result was achieved, in particular, by Prime Minister Erdoğan's official visit to Turkmenistan on 3-4 October, 2008. Observers believe that Uzbekistan's currently critical

¹⁷ A. Guriev, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ ANS-PRESS, 21 November, 2008.

position will probably change; Tashkent will not remain long outside Turkic integration. In the mid-term perspective an alliance of Turkic states might develop into a serious alternative to Ankara's desire for European integration.