

# A new chapter in Turkish - E.U. Relations?

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**Everybody from Ankara to Brussels is asking this question: With the Justice and Development Party (AKP) strengthening its position in government and Abdullah Gul as the new president, will Turkey renew its efforts to gain full EU membership ? No matter how the AKP and the Turkish people answer the question, much still depends on what happens next in Europe.**

As I've said many times before, neither Turkey nor the EU is a static entity. As their negotiations continue, both sides change their positions on issues. The reason is simple yet important: the reforms introduced as part of the negotiation process are already having an impact on Turkish society. At the same time, they are changing Europe's perception of Turkey. Politics, economics, the legal system, universities and civil groups are all responding to the changes brought about by our current engagement with Europe. The responses range from full support to stiff opposition.

This is perfectly proper. However, everyone knows that the debate isn't so much about joining the EU as what course Turkey will take in defining itself in the coming decades. With the current political reshuffling in Europe, EU leaders may never bring themselves to accept Turkey as an equal partner. Like the French presidential election earlier this year, Turkey will continue to be a testing ground for European politicians. Other European politicians may follow French President Nicolas Sarkozy's lead to use opposition to Turkey's EU membership as part of a conservative domestic agenda.

Besides political games, right now there is more tension in Europe than in Turkey over multiculturalism and accepting the realities of globalization. The EU's so-called 'enlargement fatigue' is just one aspect of the problem. Like other citizens of the world, Europeans are having a tough time adjusting to the demands of current shifts in power. There is greater demand for power-sharing from outside entities; the new immigrant communities in Europe, emerging markets, international competition from high-tech industries to universities and new regional developments are all forcing Europe as well as other leading political actors to act as fair distributors rather than jealous aggregators of power. Today, European universities have to compete with their American counterparts. The competition goes way beyond the US; India, China, Russia and other emerging regional powers are all part of the new power-sharing regime.

Europe is likely to respond to this new reality in multiple ways. As in France and Germany, political leaders with clearly conservative and inward-looking agendas may come to power and oppose Turkey's EU membership. Other smaller countries like Austria may act as the voice of a belligerent and xenophobic current against Islam and Muslims in Europe. As we saw with the Danish cartoon crisis, freedom of the press may become a tool to provoke Muslim sensitivities. The recent publication of several cartoons about the prophet of Islam in a Swiss newspaper is a dangerous sign. The real danger, however, is that every time Europe fails to cope with the hard realities of globalization, it will turn to Islam, Muslims and, yes, to Turkey's membership to clear its conscience. The whole argument over Europe becoming a 'Eurabia' is just one aspect of this dangerous trend.

It's no secret that Europe has a love-hate relationship with the current world order. The emerging patterns of power-sharing have led to serious soul-searching among Europeans to find a new role for Europe. The question is whether this process will result in opposing Turkey's EU membership. European politicians with a narrow agenda may see a lot of potential in this move.

Can Turkey stand against this tide? It can if it can manage to be a part of the debate rather than just a bystander. Turkey can't afford to merely watch the current debate in Europe and leave the final decision to the Europeans, because Turkey's relationship with Europe goes beyond the EU. This means spending a great deal of political and intellectual capital to make Turkey's voice heard in Europe. We hope that our

chief negotiator and new foreign minister, Ali Babacan, will take up the issue with the full seriousness it deserves.

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## **Sources**

Source : 9/7/2007, TDZ