

**ABSORPTION CAPACITY of the EU and TURKISH ACCESSION:
DEFINITIONS AND COMMENTS**

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Asli Toksabay Esen¹

“The prospect of further enlargement at a time when the full consequences of the preceding one have not yet been absorbed must give rise to concern. The Commission considers therefore that any further enlargement must be accompanied by a substantial improvement in the efficiency of the Community’s decision-making processes and strengthening of its common institutions.”²

Introduction

The quote above may seem familiar, in that we encounter the same wording in various opinions raised when Turkish accession is in the spotlight. In fact, it is from the European Commission’s opinion on the membership application by Greece back in 1976, three decades ago.³ This is solid evidence of concerns that each round of enlargement has raised within institutions and constituencies of the EU in terms of its precarious impact on the institutions, budget, policies, and the identity of the EU. To be fair, these concerns are rarely groundless, as the Union has typically undergone profound transformations with each enlargement, although the process can typically be termed as *creative destruction*.

Ironically however, the debate surrounding absorption capacity was intensified after the “big bang” of the EU, the enlargement rounds in 2004 and 2007 that allowed 12 new members into the Union. The widespread understanding shared across the EU and in Turkey alike was that Turkey being next in line was the factor beneath this re-heightened interest. In effect, the concept involves all prospective rounds of enlargement, and therefore Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey as current standing candidates (with Croatia and Turkey the only two negotiating countries), and possibly Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo in the Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova in Eastern Europe, Georgia and Armenia in the Caucasus, and Russia if it wishes to join. While there is a warmer attitude towards Croatian accession among the major constituents of the Union, the concept of absorption capacity is revoked more often in the case of Turkish membership and possible other future candidacies. Overall, the discussion concerning Turkish accession has become inextricably intertwined with the discourse on absorption capacity.

¹ Asli Toksabay Esen is a doctoral candidate at McMaster University, Canada and a research fellow at TEPAV.

² Katinka Barysch, “Absorption capacity – the wrong debate”, November 09, 2006, <http://centreforeuropeanreform.blogspot.com/2006/11/absorption-capacity-wrong-debate-by.html>.

³ Barysch, *ibid*.

This paper aims to analyze the woolly concept of absorption (or integration, after the recent decision of the European Commission to replace the former) capacity with particular reference to the case of Turkey. The widespread impression that this is merely a convenient escape clause to close the door on Turkey when time is due, after Turkey has sweated to meet the membership criteria and given many concessions on issues perceived to be of critical importance for national interest. In fact, the original idea as devised by the governance bodies of the Union significantly differ from the conception employed within the Turco-sceptic discourse in the member states. The primary motivation of the paper is therefore twofold. The first rationale is to try and explain the processes which have fanned nationalism and provoked a reaction of introversion in Turkey. The second is to convey the message to Turkish nationals that the idea is not entirely fictional and deserves some pause for reflection considering the daunting nature of the task of bringing in a country like Turkey to a supranational organization like the European Union.

Conceptual framework

The notion of absorption capacity appeared for the first time in the Copenhagen Summit conclusions in 1993, which stated:

“The Union’s capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries.”⁴

The European Council summit in June 2006 called on the Commission to produce a report on the issue, with the consideration that the cohesion and effectiveness of the Union needs to be protected and the Union is ensured to function politically, financially and institutionally in the process of widening concomitant with deepening.⁵ The attempts to clarify the vague idea of absorption capacity in the Enlargement Strategy Papers of 2005 and 2006 produced a definition that places emphasis on the “capacity to act and decide according to a fair balance within institutions; respect budgetary limits and implement common policies that function well and achieve their objectives⁶” without “jeopardizing the political and policy objectives established by the (EU) Treaties.”⁷

Although the attempt to provide a definition was worth the while, further effort is merited to equip the concept with substance or content. The frequent employment of the notion in the enlargement discourse without satisfactory explanation as to what it actually entails sends mixed signals to aspiring countries and creates backlash, as expressed above, while confusion seems to prevail even within the Union. There are dissident voices on even the very technical issue of whether integration capacity is a fourth Copenhagen criterion. While some member countries and mainly those that adopt a lukewarm approach to Turkish accession, as well as the European Parliament, tend to present it as part of the Copenhagen criteria (and actually one that prevails over others in significance)⁸, the Council and the Commission insist that this is merely a consideration, as voiced by topmost officials like Mr. Jose Barroso, the President of the European Commission and Enlargement Commissioner Olli

⁴ European Council Meeting in Copenhagen, 21-22 June 1993, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/72921.pdf.

⁵ European Council, Presidency Conclusions, 15-16 June 2006, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/90111.pdf.

⁶ European Commission, 2005 Enlargement Strategy Paper, 9 November 2005, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=en&numdoc=505DC0561.

⁷ European Commission, Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006 – 2007, 8 November 2006, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/NR/rdonlyres/B7481C71-7900-4D9D-940E-AE16B0F99AFF/0/strategy_paper_en_8Kasim2006.pdf.

⁸ European Parliament, “Parliament’s position on Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership”, 25 September 2006, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/background_page/027-10805-268-09-39-903-20060919BKG10804-25-09-2006-2006-false/default_en.htm, Euractiv, “Future enlargement: ‘absorption capacity’ coming to the fore?”, 22 March 2006, <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/future-enlargement-absorption-capacity-coming-fore/article-153608>.

Rehn.⁹ Relying on the official formulation, absorption (integration) capacity refers to the functioning of the European Union itself and the amendments and reformations to be made there, rather than any (additional) imposition on the candidate country.

Criticisms also abound: The concept has been charged with being vague, unhelpful, fallacious, politically charged, misleading, and finally, dishonest.¹⁰ A most convincing critique comes from Frank Vibert, who argues that the discourse on absorptive capacity presumes membership and its benefits an almost “scarce resource” in the sense that difficulties arise and the benefits of membership weaken as size grows. To the contrary, Vibert argues, EU membership offers “network” values, i.e. the value of the common rules that lay the foundations of the benefits of membership increases as more parties subscribe to them. On a more practical note, the adaptability of the Union structures to ever altering circumstances is emphasized by Vibert and other commentators alike. As for the implications for Turkey, a recent paper by Senem Aydın Düzgit which has had widespread resonance in the EU and in Turkey argues that EU-Turkey relations are characterized by double-standards, the absorption capacity question being merely one among many.¹¹ The paper states that the question of absorption capacity has not been addressed in the negotiations for 12 new members, nor has it been a point of emphasis for Croatia, despite the fact that the term has been a currency for a decade and a half, and has been recalled only after Turkish accession process came onto the table.

I should note at this point that the usage of the term “absorption capacity” is typically accompanied by a discourse on “enlargement fatigue” and “final frontiers.” Enlargement fatigue, like the absorption capacity itself, is not entirely fictional. It will not be easy for the Union to adapt to the presence of 12 new member states, particularly taking into consideration that these came out of Communist rule just two decades ago, and still tend to have fragile economies and immature democracies. Nevertheless, the newly assumed membership status of the 12 new members will probably accelerate and facilitate a relatively smoother transition and consolidation. Meanwhile, EU institutions and mechanisms will also need to be transformed in order to match the new realities of the larger Union (a process already underway). Additionally, it would be safe to argue that the process of integrating 12 new members, each with its own characteristics and requirements, will be a valuable learning experience for the EU, widening its perspective in the dos and don'ts of enlargement. These experiences will be an asset in the future integration of Turkey, which, with all the difficulties it may entail, will presumably still be easier than bringing in the variety of the 2004 and 2007 rounds. As for final frontiers, while sceptics of further enlargement try and confine “Europe” to the conventionally defined geographical extent stopping at the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, or, more critically to notions of belonging or religious affiliation, another, more inclusive proposition is to define it in terms of membership in the Council of Europe (which, in turn, includes Turkey and Russia).

Components of the Idea and Implications for Turkey

The emphasis in various attempts to clarify the exact content of the issue overlap in a number of points and also corresponds in part to the points made in the definition itself. These include the way in which EU institutions, budget, foreign policy and security, and society and culture will respond to further enlargement, and hence to the accession of Turkey. A recent paper by Michael Emerson lists goods and services markets, labour markets, EU budget and

⁹ Euractiv, “EU cements 'absorption capacity' as the new stumbling block to enlargement”, 16 June 2006,

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/agenda2004/eu-cements-absorption-capacity-new-stumbling-block-enlargement/article-156179>.

¹⁰ Barysch, “Absorption capacity – the wrong debate”, Frank Vibert, “Absorption capacity: the wrong European debate”, 21 June 2006, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europe/constitution/wrong_debate_3666.jsp.

¹¹ Senem Aydın Düzgit, *Seeking Kant in the EU's relations with Turkey*, TESEV Publications, December 2006

funds, EU institutions, the society and strategic concerns.¹² Andreas Schockenhoff, Deputy Chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in German Bundestag, on the other hand, cites the same issues on the overall scale but underlines the “common European identity” as the core issue to be addressed, and employs the discourse on the final frontiers of Europe.¹³

To elaborate on these points individually with reference to Turkish membership, one may begin by noting that Turkey is, on the overall scheme, thought to be “too big, too poor, too Muslim” to be a part of the EU. It is perceived to be very likely to disrupt the European institutions and funds with its sizeable population. The problem of absorption in terms of the goods and services market, save for the agricultural sector, is almost negligible, as Turkey has been upholding a Customs Union with the EU for more than a decade now. The question of labour markets, on the other hand, is relatively more problematic in the short to medium term, as 2.1 million migrants are expected to flow to other EU members by 2030, according to a study, if free mobility of labour is the case.¹⁴ Therefore, the myth of the Polish plumber is now transposed and mapped onto Turkish cheap labour. High levels of unemployment and failure to assimilate immigrants of earlier waves of migration (Turks in Germany and North Africans in France in particular, which in turn has implications in terms of Islamophobia) amount to a stronger aversive attitude. However, the looming “demographic deficit” of the EU needs to be kept in perspective.

The technical issue of the burden to be placed by Turkish accession on the funds and the budget of the EU needs a more thorough analysis that goes beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁵ Redistributive funds for cohesion within the Union are a major concern at the moment due to wide discrepancies between EU-15/25 and Turkey as well as within Turkey. Nevertheless, the current state of affairs is prone to rapid change if current dynamism of the Turkish economy can be maintained and even boosted further with the prospective membership (as seen before in the cases of Greece, Spain and Portugal). This dynamism can be boosted further by education and training, i.e. skills building and skills conversion, which would be beneficial to both the productivity growth in Turkey and the skilled human capital needs of the EU in the medium to short term. Moreover, a capacity to distribute the wealth to be generated to the broader masses will be the antidote of vast unskilled migrant outflow dreaded by the core EU.

The impact of Turkish accession on the current setup of the EU institutions will depend on the political will to accommodate Turkey. The recent rounds of enlargement have already necessitated considerable reform, partially tackled under the Nice Treaty, and possible future enlargement can be kept in mind in the formulation of institutional setup, allowing for necessary flexibility for accommodation of newcomers. A point of consensus across disparate views, however, is that improvements are required to the existing formulation in any case. Finally, the questions raised in terms of security and foreign policy include whether Turkey will be a security asset or a security liability for the EU. Enlargement would bring EU borders all the way to the Middle East and Caucasus, which seems to be illicit for certain political actors in Europe. Similarly, border security and transnational flows is another point of

¹² Michael Emerson et al., ‘Just what is this “absorptive capacity” of the European Union?’, Centre for European Policy Studies Publications nr.113, September 2006.

¹³ Andreas Schockenhoff, ‘Enlargement: Six tests for the EU’s absorption capacity’, www.europesworld.org/EWSettings/Article/tabid/78/Default.aspx?Id=f3f02b39-9201-4be3-af9a-7130e348cba5.

¹⁴ Refik Erzan, Umut Kuzubaş and Nilüfer Yıldız, “Growth and Immigration Scenarios for Turkey and the EU”, Centre for European Policy Studies EU-Turkey Working Papers no.13, December 2004.

¹⁵ This paper is intended to be a broad overview of major issues and questions. Note, however, that a forthcoming TEPAV|EPRI report will be analyzing the questions and the possible economic impacts of Turkish membership in greater detail.

concern. However, as former debates in the case of European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) and NATO have indicated, Turkey remains an important part of the equation.

The entire scheme portrayed above may be resolved if the political will exist on both sides to make Turkey part of the European Union. Treaties can be amended, political reforms can be carried out, institutions restructured and compromises reached. One issue that is “unprecedented” in that it has never been raised in the former rounds of enlargement¹⁶ and one that simply cannot be handled through systematic restoration on either side, however, is the question as to whether Turkey is “European” in identity or belonging terms. More often than not, this is used as a euphemism for Turkey being a predominantly Muslim country, a concern sometimes not vocalized candidly in the name of political correctness. However, this is an integral part of the debate in Europe concerning Turkish accession, so much so that Olli Rehn declared: “We must avoid making enlargement hostage to a *theological* debate about the final borders of Europe (emphasis added).” The question of absorption in this case by “Turco-sceptics” is formulated as a concern for “the degree of diversity and social and cultural differences the EU can cope with.”¹⁷ Here, Turkey is presented as an outsider, as one of the elements in the EU’s “interaction with *other* religions and cultures” in the words of Angela Merkel. The secular nature of the country finds little reference in these discussions, which are aggravated by current waves of Islamophobia, xenophobia, terrorism scare and problems concerning resident minorities. Consistent unfavourable public opinion regarding Turkish accession is also a concern for European politicians, and also a source for votes for some wings of the political spectrum. More will be said below on the attitudes of various actors in Europe on integration capacity and the Turkish accession.

Attitudes of major European players towards enlargement/Turkish accession:

As mentioned above, the attitudes of even the core European institutions like the Commission, the Parliament and the Council on further enlargement and particularly the Turkish membership vary. Within the Parliament, Conservatives deny Turkey’s European belonging and vocation, while left-wing and green elements tend to favour Turkish accession as a source of diversity and multi-culturality, and endorse the reform process underway in Turkey. On a more remarkable level, even the Commission seems to have dissident voices concerning Turkish accession. In 2004, Commissioner for Agriculture Franz Fischler defended that Turkey was culturally oriental, geographically Asian and that accession would open “a geostrategic Pandora’s box.” Frits Bolkestein, the Dutch Commissioner for the Internal Market was less diplomatic when he said that admitting Turkey could mean that the historic defeat of Ottoman armies at the gates of Vienna in 1683 “would have been in vain”.¹⁸ From a distance, however, the reports and resolutions by the European Parliament reflect the majority vote across the Union i.e. an unfavourable view of Turkey, while the Commission insists that Turkey’s road to membership is open-ended, but open nevertheless.

As for individual countries, France played a major part in the discussions of absorption capacity, particularly concerning Turkish accession. Right and left wingers alike oppose future enlargements (with the possible exception of Croatia) without substantial reform in EU decision-making mechanisms and institutions, a strong budget and the consent of European peoples on the accession of individual candidates (via, inter alia, referenda). Emphasis is

¹⁶ Annabelle Littoz-Monnet and Beatriz Villanueva Penas, ‘Turkey and the European Union. The implications of a specific enlargement’, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations European Affairs Working Paper, 4 April 2005, www.irri-kiib.be/papers/050404Turquie-ALM-BVP.pdf.

¹⁷ Schockenhoff, *Enlargement*.

¹⁸ Andrew Purvis, ‘At the Gates of the Union’, Time, 3 October 2004, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0.8816.708954.00.html#>; Christian Science Monitor, ‘Wariness over Turkey’s EU bid’, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/1006/p06s02-woeu.html>.

placed on economic burdens, labour market grievances and socio-cultural discrepancies. Concerns about the public opinion are aggravated by the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French (and Dutch) public in 2005, paving the way for a legitimacy crisis. Previous comments of former President Giscard d'Estaing and current interior minister Sarkozy (also presidential candidate for 2007 elections) on the questionability of Turkey's belonging with Europe are well known. Right-wing UDF's presidential candidate François Bayrou also said in February that he is against further enlargement in general and Turkey's membership in particular, offering privileged partnership in its stead.

Germany's attitude towards enlargement in general and Turkey's accession in particular seems to oscillate as the parties in power change. Current Chancellor Angela Merkel and conservatives overall, like their counterparts in France and elsewhere, ask for privileged partnership rather than full membership. In fact, similar to the French example, many politicians, including Merkel have used the Turkish case as a tool for leverage in their election campaigns. The question of identity is frequently recalled, as well as the questions concerning security once the EU borders extend to neighbour Iraq, Iran, Syria, Georgia etc. if Turkey becomes a member.

British politicians, on the other hand, are more dismissive of the idea of absorption capacity, enlargement fatigue or final frontiers in the overall sense, as these are "interpreted by many in the candidate countries as an excuse for closing the Union's doors." They do recognize the need for institutional, financial and policy reform in order to be able to incorporate newcomers, but decline the notions of absorption of enlargement by the publics or socio-cultural absorption. Britain calls for a solid definition of the components of the absorption capacity idea in order to convert these into concrete reforms. It is in favour of Turkish membership in the EU, partly with transatlantic motivations and partly owing to their less firm faith compared to Germany and France in the need for a close-knit Union with a high level of socio-cultural convergence and unity.

The issue that is implied here but should be stressed further is that Europe, just like Turkey, is not a uniform, monolithic bloc with a single opinion or a single voice. Opposition can and will be voiced, but this does not necessarily mean a comprehensive or outright rejection, or the end of the journey for Turkey.

Conclusions

The discourse on the absorption capacity of the EU has been perceived as an alibi to turn backs to Turkey. The timing and the frequent reference to the case of Turkey throughout the debate has not been very helpful in that sense either. However, the fact that these are not entirely fictive concerns to sever ties with Turkey as a prospective member and that at least some of them are true, legitimate concerns should be underscored here. EU is not just a VIP club where members are being too whimsical to allow new members in. It is, in fact, a complex sum of rules, regulations, institutions, and codes of conduct that demand convergence and cohesion among its members. On the other hand, the Turkish economy is still suffering several deficiencies, with a sizeable gap in income and welfare terms within the country as well as against the Union, tendency towards volatilities and vulnerabilities, inflation and debt levels that remain high compared to the Maastricht criteria.

Therefore, the Turkish audience should be aware that Turkey is indeed a major challenge for its counterparts due to its size, economic circumstances. In the same vein, the road to membership will also pose challenges for Turkey as policymakers and the public alike come to realize better what sorts of issues are involved, a process already underway and a partial explanation for the rising Euro-scepticism in Turkey. To be fair, the European reluctance to admit Turkey seems to be likely to complicate matters and prolong the accession

process for Turkey as well. On the other hand, European Union has at the same time set out to become a totality of universal values that aspires to promote diversity and multiculturalism. Turkey may be better off in this sense to simply point this fact out –probably alongside the note that Turkey is and will remain a secular country- and leave it to domestic constituencies to sort out their own common values and identity.

There are, however, things that Turkey and the EU decisionmakers could, and should do to make the process somewhat smoother. Communication will be key. Now that communication is part of the present enlargement agenda alongside consolidation and conditionality,¹⁹ more awareness needs to be raised to underscore the actual and potential benefits of enlargement, and of Turkish accession. European politicians, greatly distressed and discouraged by the results of the French and Dutch referenda, have allegedly become followers rather than leaders of public opinion.²⁰ If they do subscribe to a solid and lasting EU project, they will need to take affirmative steps and assume a leading and informing role without fear of touching “emotional cords” in the words of Joost Lagendijk. In the longer run, adopting absorptive capacity as a convenient escape clause to avoid further enlargement may turn out to be hazardous and counter-productive.

The temporal dimension is also a major issue to be taken into consideration here. Enlargement rounds are unlikely to proceed in the very near future. The processes under concern such as the institutional structure and the internal market, as well as public opinion, are not static concepts. The institutional setup is subject to change with the first incoming new member under the Treaty of Nice, and the overall scheme will most probably be transformed radically over a course of 10 to 20 years. The main issue at stake at this point is whether Turkey will be accounted for as a prospective member while these transformations are designed.

Once again though, while absorptive capacity, like enlargement fatigue, is –at least partially- factual, it is not permanent. As the recent enlargement rounds are consolidated and prove fruitful, the scepticism prevalent in the public opinion may be reversed. The possibility that the current wave of introversion and xenophobia is a question of conjuncture should not be dismissed. These tendencies are in part the outcome of a stagnant economy in Europe, creating its own winners and losers, who in turn adopt different perspectives regarding integration with the outside world, whether on a regional or a global scale. Note, however, that a widespread tendency among the European peoples is to conflate the impacts of globalization with those of EU membership, and particularly with enlargement. A strategy should be devised to effectively communicate the European project to the peoples.

Many authorities detect latent drawbacks in defining final frontiers as well. A mainstream argument in this vein is that defining borders will result in the EU narrowing down its own room for manoeuvre, curbing its capacity to induce or at least encourage change in its neighbours. This would run counter to the logic beyond the European Neighbourhood Policy devised to avoid definitive and divisive borders to be erected between members and neighbours. In the words of Olli Rehn, “it is not deemed sensible to close the door forever by drawing a line across the map to define Europe once and for all, which would seriously damage our possibilities of having a beneficial influence and strategic leverage in our immediate neighbourhood.”²¹

¹⁹ EC Enlargement Strategy, 2006

²⁰ Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck (Belgian Liberal MEP), “*Just what is this absorption capacity of the European Union?*”, Joint EP Brussels Information Office- Bahçeşehir University, CEPS Seminar, 30 November 2006.

²¹ Olli Rehn, “Commission’s Enlargement Strategy”, Plenary Session at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15 March 2006.

One final layer of the strategy to be devised may be to play the ‘Europe as a global player’ card. Both Turkish and European policymakers need to explain to the European audience that a wider EU is better equipped to tackle global challenges, provided it can improve its capabilities through education, training, labour market reform, employment creation, productivity enhancement, R&D and innovation. At the same time, EU as a global player will need to be more proactive in security and defence issues, build a common foreign policy and become more involved in global problems, particularly in its “near abroad”, for which it will need to be in close contact with Turkey regardless.

This brings us back to the question of communication. The components of absorption capacity should be better explicated, and necessary action should be taken to accommodate newcomers if closing down the borders once and for all is not a viable or a desirable option. A positive agenda can be co-authored whereby the focus is shifted to issues like enhanced productivity and innovation to ensure sustained growth, skills building and conversion, the creation of energy networks with Turkey as a key node, or Turkey as a security and defence partner. These will all amount to efforts to make a reliable and desirable partner, and eventual EU member out of Turkey, and will be the way out of the current discourse, or rather the negative agenda, which has issues like identity and belonging in its centrepiece. If Turkey and the EU want to make their relations work, they will need to cooperate and concentrate on issues where they can make a change, rather than losing steam with futile and counter-productive debates.