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Why the Unease among EU Citizens Over Turkey's Membership?

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Due to the intensification of the impact of the global crisis on Turkey's economy, the capacity to create new employment opportunities has become constrained and significant employment losses have been observed. The unemployment rate, which varied around 10 percent until the third quarter of 2008, rose to 16.1 and 13.6 percent in the first and second quarter of 2009, respectively. Although there appears to be a relative recovery in unemployment in the second quarter, it seems that this stems from the decrease in the number of people seeking a job and a rise in the number of discouraged workers. When examining the employed, it is observed that this deterioration continues. In the first and second quarters of 2009, the number of employed people decreased by 85 thousand and 387 thousand respectively compared to the same periods in 2008. It is important to understand employment dynamics in order to introduce measures to alleviate the unemployment problem. This note examines the employment dynamics in Turkey in the first quarter of 2009 when the effects of the crisis were most visible. It also puts forth the effects of business size and regional differences on employment. The analysis clearly reveals that the crisis leads to an asymmetrical impact, evident from the fact that firms in different regions and with different sizes are affected by the crisis in different periods and magnitudes.

Over the past weeks, the outcomes of a research project by Boğaziçi University, University of Granada, and Autonomous University of Madrid featured on EU- and Turkey-based newswires. According to surveys carried out with more than 5000 respondents from France, Germany, Poland, Spain, and United Kingdom, the rates of European Union (EU) citizens who favoured and opposed Turkey's membership were equal (47%); whereas the majority of the respondents (52%) maintained that they would vote against Turkey's membership in a referendum. The rate of those who said they would vote in favour remained at 41%¹.

The 6% difference between those claiming to support Turkey's membership and those maintaining that they will vote in favour is surprising, to be sure. Prof. Dr. Hakan Yılmaz, one of the project leaders, explains this difference with the fact that people tend to take a stand in the direction of maintaining the status quo if their vote is to lead to a significant change. An alternative stance can be in the vein that if those who favour Turkey's membership in principle and in the wider timeframe are compelled to make a decision right away, they are likely to adopt an unfavourable attitude on the basis of certain concerns, including their perception over Turkey's readiness for the membership.

The representativeness of the survey conducted in five countries with a relatively small sample compared to Eurobarometer surveys is evidently questionable. On the other hand, the survey includes,

¹ http://hakanyilmaz.info/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/BUCES-AID-UAM-OpinionPoll-Comments-English-v01.356161846.pdf

along with 'Turkosceptic' countries like France and Germany, three countries that are known to have a more favourable attitude towards Turkey's membership. At the country level, the negative attitude of France and Germany prevails, as can be expected; while Poland and Spain appear to assume a more positive attitude, though only with a marginal difference. The stance of UK citizens, on the other hand, is rather ambivalent. At any rate, 47% categorical opposition in the overall sense is way too high.

An interesting assessment at this point may address the question whether the global economic crisis has affected the views about Turkey's membership. Although a comparison of Eurobarometer results with the outputs of the abovementioned project will not generate sound results given the differences in method and scope, considering that the ratio of the EU-27 citizens opposing to Turkey's membership has not fallen below 50% over the last years, it can be concluded that the impact of the crisis, of the deteriorating economic statuses at individual and societal levels and of the rising opposition to migration and immigrants on the attitude vis-à-vis Turkey's accession is not too severe. However, another interpretation may be that Turkey's outlook in the eyes of the EU citizens has deteriorated to an ultimate low, which may be less than an exaggerated argument given the current state of affairs in Turkey-EU relations.

The survey also proposes some results that are more likely to lend themselves to optimism. As Prof. Yılmaz indicates, when it comes to Turkey, the attitude of country leaders gain significance. Yılmaz, quite justifiably, says "politics leads public opinion, rather than the other way around." On the other hand, given the fact that leaders can change, it is a possibility that we will witness another spring in Turkey-EU relations as was the case in early 2000s. Another point is that the discourse emphasizing the *pacta sunt servanda* principle has a remarkable resonance on the public opinion, which can prove an important argument for Turkey in due course. As per another outcome which can be considered favourable, young generations have a more positive attitude towards Turkey's membership. Considering the implicit consensus on the fact that Turkey's membership will not materialize overnight, we can assume that Turkey will face more and more positive attitudes over time, unless the pressure of some development emanating from Turkey or the EU changes the minds of the European youths. What is more, we can also anticipate that over the process until membership, both Turkey and the EU will go through a series of transformations, which will ensure convergence and thus render a Turkey readier for membership and an EU readier to accept Turkey as a member.

But can we rely on this?

First off, we must offer an accurate portrayal of the expectations and the problems. Two studies previously carried out at TEPAV² addressed in detail the issues which different EU member countries prioritize and problematize regarding Turkey's accession. If we proceed with reasoning based upon the aforementioned studies and surveys conducted outside TEPAV, when EU citizens are asked, without mentioning Turkey's name, which issues they consider as a prerequisite for further enlargement of the Union, the primary issues that take the lead are liberties and democratic values (around 50%) and economic concerns (40%)³. EU's global role (15%) and its ageing population (10%), arguments most frequently cited on Turkey's part, do not appear to have any significant resonance across European public opinion. More importantly, the emphasis put on human rights and democracy reaches as high as 85% when a specific reference is made to the case of Turkey⁴.

So, where does the problem lie? The overall sentiment is that the issue hits a wall at the point of cultural and religious differences. In this vein, the survey by Boğaziçi University reveals that the rate of those opposing to Turkey's membership on the basis of religious differences is considerably high (39%). What is more interesting, the ratio of those prioritizing cultural and religious issues as a prerequisite to enlargement, when asked without mentioning Turkey's name, remains only around 20%⁵... This is a tough call; because it is harder for individuals and sometimes for societies to change their views on religion and culture, which constitute a significant part of their perceptions about identity.

As it is not possible for us to change our religious and cultural identity, the most appropriate option seems to be moving the issue of culture out of the context of primordialist/essentialist definitions such as religion and ethnicity, and rather linking it to shared values like citizenship and coexistence. To this end, internalization of common values including democracy, human rights and pluralism and the formulation of the discourse along this axis come to the forefront as a prerequisite.

Another important issue in parallel with the previous point is defining Turkey's membership and the benefits to the EU of Turkey's membership not through interests but through a commonality of and partnership in values. As pointed out above, basing arguments concerning the benefits of Turkey's membership upon its contribution to EU's prospects as a global power or as a remedy to EU's ageing population problem implies conceding at the outset that your arguments will fall on deaf ears, at least as far as the public opinion is concerned.

Within the same context, it is probably time we began to take into more serious (re)consideration the discourse that brings to the fore the 'Alliance of Civilizations', which presents Turkey as the

² Conditionality, Impact and Prejudice in Turkey-EU Relations, <http://www.tepav.org.tr/eng/admin/dosyabul/upload/Quaderni.pdf>; Talking Turkey in Europe: Implications for a Communication Strategy; http://www.iai.it/pdf/Quaderni/Quaderni_E_13.pdf

³ http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_257_sum_en.pdf

⁴ <http://www.euractiv.com/en/priorities/turkey-eu-public-thinks/article-171187>

⁵ Ibid.

representative of the Muslim world, reflects an interest-driven outlook, and more importantly, puts a persistent emphasis on difference, rather than commonality, in terms of Turkey's culture and values.

Finally, in its interaction with the EU, Turkey should keep in mind that information that seems hardest to digest is better than the ideational offspring of ignorance and of an imagination left in the dark. In this sense, the government and the civil society should initiate extensive efforts to improve the level of information on Turkey among EU citizens. Nonetheless, such a communication strategy had better go beyond serving as a platform for backbiting and bickering among Turkey's social groups, which have been going through a process of domestic strife, in the convenient presence of European audiences.

Needless to say, we cannot overlook the decision- and policy-makers themselves as we orchestrate a public communication strategy: It would be a truism to say that negotiations must be carried out/on and the political dialogue with EU leaders both at the Union and member state levels must be maintained along the way.