

THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND TURKEY

What's the best way of getting emotions to run high in a dull European election? The answer: use Turkey. In recent weeks, no other topic has dominated debates on Europe within member countries more than Ankara's (im)possible entry into the EU. In Germany, politicians of Bavaria's Christian Social Union did the rounds of beer tents with a 'clear no to Turkey'; in Austria the right-wing Freedom Party printed posters with the slogan 'Abendland in Christenhand' ('The West is Christian'); and in the Netherlands the populist Geert Wilders warned of the dangers of a 'disastrous Islamisation' of Europe, demanding a permanent halt to the construction of mosques. It is not only Wilders' electoral success which will have visibly increased the number of sceptics and opponents of Turkish entry to the EU in the new European Parliament. If you put the question to ordinary Europeans on the street, these are of one opinion in any case: only a third of all EU citizens want Turkey to become a member. A majority in favour of Turkish entry exists in only four of the 27 member countries: Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal and Sweden. In Germany only 17.1 per cent approve the move, whilst in Austria the figure is just 5.6 per cent. The political vision of integrating Turkey into the EU has long ceased to be something that a majority of Europeans feel enthusiastic about. Their image of Turkey is characterised not by a sense of opportunity but by anxieties: anxiety over the movement of migrants, anxiety over threats to their own way of life, anxiety towards Islam.

This is a gift to any electoral campaign. And the chances of full EU membership for Turkey seem in any case to have moved a great deal further into the future.



An election poster from the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, for the European election, in displayed in Vienna, Austria on 21 May 2009. The poster reads "The West in Christian hands" and "Day of revenge". Austria's far-right Freedom Party came under fire for inflammatory newspaper campaign ads focused on Turkey and Israel ahead of the June 2009 European elections.

Although the country has enjoyed candidate status for the last ten years, and has been negotiating with Brussels over full membership for the last four, signs of a rapprochement are few and far between at the current time. Last year Turkey made 'only lim-

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ited progress', according to an internal report for the Commission; some of Ankara's decisions, the report also stated, were completely unacceptable. Criticisms have been made of the sluggish pace of reforms in the areas of freedom of expression, human rights and the rule of law. But Ankara's refusal to recognise Cyprus, an EU member, and to apply the contractual agreements between Ankara and Brussels to all new EU member countries, have soured the atmosphere. If major EU countries such as Germany and France had their way, the troublesome project of Turkish membership would be laid to rest sooner than later, and be replaced by the consolation prize of a 'privileged partnership'.

The problem is that this suggestion hasn't gone down particularly well in Turkey. Ahmet Davutoglu, the new Turkish foreign minister, recently stated that there is no alternative to full EU membership for his country. Either we're in properly, or we're not in at all, is the message. That the latter scenario might become reality is something that not only the Turks understand as a warning: many in Europe, too, worry about what would happen if Turkey's connection to the West were lost, something which could have undreamed-of consequences for Europe's political stability, its military security and the safety of its energy supplies.

Increasing alienation between the EU and Ankara puts the Europeans in a strategic dilemma: the tougher they are in opposing Turkey's admission into the EU, the harder Ankara currently concentrates on its eastern and southern neighbours: the Arab and Islamic World, and the Caucasus and Central Asia. And this, in turn, makes Turkey all the more valuable for Europe.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has on previous occasions dropped hints about the 'alternatives' to Europe that his country has. And Erdogan has made it clear recently what those 'alternatives' might be. The head of government has not only taken on the role of mediator between Russia and Georgia, between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Syrians and Israelis; he has also had no reservations in dealing with Hamas and Hisbollah, branded pariahs by the West. In the Gaza war, it is said, Erdogan achieved more than veterans of the Near East such as Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak.

This 'multidimensional' focus of the new Turkish foreign policy has been frequently described, by both critics and supporters, as 'Neo-Osmanism'. The form it takes is that of a new self-confidence, as Turkey takes on the role of regional power in what was once the Ottoman Empire's sphere of influence. A one-sided focus on the West, such as was the case during the Cold War, is unhealthy for a country as geographically and culturally multiple as Turkey, argue the proponents of the new thinking. Whether the only Muslim country in NATO has thus moved away from the West, or whether it has genuinely been building bridges to the Islamic world, remains unclear. Can the EU profit, in reality, from Turkish willingness to engage in dialogue with problematic states? And how definite is the prospect of a reliable Turkish energy corridor, through which Russian and Caspian, but also Iraqi and Iranian oil and gas would soon flow to energy-hungry Europe?

The key question for Europe in this context is how Turkey can be kept in a good mood if the opponents of EU membership prevail and the negotiations are indeed broken off. Another question is how far Europe and Turkey have really moved apart already. According to a new poll, the popularity of the EU has recently grown again, with 57 per cent of the Turkish population supporting entry (a year and a half ago the figure was only 30 per cent). But at the same time a majority of those polled were convinced that the Union's real aim is to split their country, and that its top goal is to spread Christianity. That is schizophrenic to say the least. But it speaks volumes about the difficult psychology of relations between Europeans and Turks. The Turks, too, have long since realised that they are not really wanted in Europe. Hurt by Brussels' stalling tactics, a kind of defiant pride has made itself felt on the Bosphorus. 'We're back in town', seems to be the feeling, 'even if Europe won't have us.'

The country's new confidence will not have been damaged by comments made by US President Barack Obama during his visit at the beginning of April, in which he praised Turkey as a 'bridge between the Islamic world and the West' and as a 'strong, secular democracy'. The President sensed that Ankara is thirsty for recognition. And he gave the Turks exactly what they want so much from the Europeans.

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