

## Turkey and the EU: strategic implications for Central Europe

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The discussion on European-Turkish relations is in many cases underpinned with arbitrary historical references and questionable cultural-religious argumentations. Although few European intellectuals publicly reject Turkey's membership bid on the basis of its Islamic identity, it is clear that many elites and the general public feel uneasy about Europe and Islam. These positions are genuinely challenged by the view that Europe is not and should not become a Christian Club, but a zone of cultural and religious diversity.

Neither position offers a satisfying framework for analysing the potential impact of Turkey's EU membership on the countries of Central Europe.

### **Background**

On a practical level the question of Turkey is less about Islam or nationalism, and more about the process of democratic reform. Following the civil war of the 1970s, military rule in the 1980s, and a decade of insurgency in the 1990s, Turkey has cultivated a vibrant civil society.

Admittedly, Turkey still faces a wide range of problems ranging from corruption and organized crime, to economic uncertainty, and a 'rough' neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>. However, as the Commission Report states, Turkey has fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria and negotiations should therefore start as soon as possible.

The start of negotiations is seen as crucial by observers inside and outside Turkey. What hangs in the balance is not only Turkey's economy and therefore future stability and prosperity, but also its democratic transition. In this regard, Turkey's case resembles the developments in many ex-communist countries where reforms were stimulated and propelled forward by the clear prospect of full membership. However, this is not to say that Turkey's democratization process will come to a halt in the event of a European "no." Turkey's modern and democratic institutions will survive even without full EU integration.

A far more interesting and challenging question is: will a Europe that doesn't include Turkey survive in the long-run? Many, including the former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing think yes. However the notion of a Europe based on principles of exclusion is fundamentally problematic.

Aside from the membership question, Turkish modern political engagement and geopolitical outlook has a considerable, though indirect, impact on the stability and security of countries of Central Europe. Turkish geopolitical interests, for example, expand deep into the Western Balkans, making Ankara a major factor in the stability equation of this region. At the same time, Turkish geographic location and energy projects are becoming increasingly relevant to energy security of Central European countries, all of which depend on Russia for the majority of their natural gas imports<sup>2</sup>.

### **Turkey's role in the Western Balkans**

Turkey maintains a sizeable and visible military presence in the Balkans. Its forces are engaged in Kosovo (KFOR), Bosnia-Herzegovina (EU-led police mission, and in EUFOR-ALTHEA), and in Macedonia (Proxima). Turkey is a member of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) which also includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and Croatia<sup>3</sup>. The significance of SEECP's lies in the fact that it is the only framework for cooperation to date which emanates from the region itself. Ankara has also been an ardent supporter of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe since its inception.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey shares borders with Syria, Iran, Iraq, as well as Armenia and Georgia.

<sup>2</sup> In some cases this dependency is a hundred percent.

<sup>3</sup> Moldova participates in this regional format as an observer.

Turkey's strategic contribution to security and stability in the Balkans is twofold. First, Turkey's firm entrenchment in the West as a NATO ally and a reliable partner of the EU strengthens the Western (EU) presence in the Balkan region. Because stabilization of the Western Balkans remains an EU priority for the foreseeable future—which is naturally of serious relevance for the Central European states—Turkey's direct engagement in stability and security of the Balkans and the wider Southeast Europe therefore overlaps almost identically with the security interests of the Central European countries.

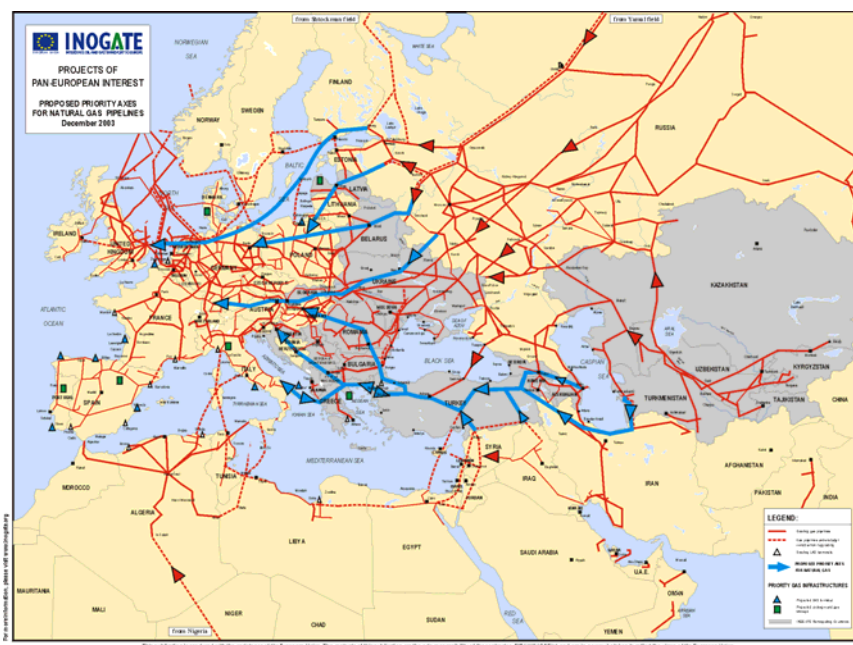
Second, Turkish presence in the Western Balkans is in a way a reassurance to both the local Muslim population and the EU. Turkish presence in the Balkans is a positive alternative—and to an extent even a natural buffer—to the more radical Islamic groups of the Middle East that have tried on numerous occasions to radicalize the overwhelmingly secular Islam of the Balkans.

**Turkey is the new energy hub for Central Europe**

The EU energy market is growing increasingly dependent on imports. Europe will soon import over 70 percent of all its energy. Europe's main gas corridors today run either through and from North Africa and connect to the EU grids through Italy and Spain, or, from Russia through Ukraine to Central and Western Europe. Turkey's geographic position is unique; its closeness to the most important gas fields of Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, Iran and Russia has made Turkey the most attractive gateway for the "third artery" of Europe's energy supply.

Feasibility studies are being conducted where Turkey would send three pipeline channels to Europe: two would service Central Europe directly, while the third would deviate through Greece into Italy<sup>4</sup>. The three-way split would see one pipeline pass through Bulgaria, Romania, and connect in Budapest to the Central European network (see map). The second line would pass through the Balkans and connect to the Central European network in Zagreb (see map). The third line will pass through Greece and connect directly to Italy (see map).

**Graph 1 – European transportation grid for natural gas<sup>5</sup>**



Turkey's strategic geographical position is also making it an indispensable partner for countries in Central Asia such as Turkmenistan, as well as Iran, which are seeking to enter the European energy market but would prefer to avoid dependency on the Russian transportation grid.

<sup>4</sup> See John Roberts: The Turkish Gate: Energy Transit and Security Issues, CEPS, EU-Turkey Working Papers, 11 October 2004. Available at [www.ceps.be](http://www.ceps.be).

<sup>5</sup> Source: INOGATE; [www.inogate.org/html/maps/mapsgas.htm](http://www.inogate.org/html/maps/mapsgas.htm). The blue lines are the projects under study

**Conclusion**

The future of Turkey as an EU member will not impact this country's growing impact on the developments in Central Europe. Due to Ankara's active engagement in the Balkans and Turkey's new role as an energy hub, countries of Central Europe must nurture a more integrated and strategic dialogue with Turkey. Positive developments on the Russia-Turkey axis could also propel Turkey into the position of a broker between Russian and Central Europe. Decision-makers in Central Europe must consider the circumstances under which a stronger and more productive dialogue with Turkey would be possible: with Turkey firmly on the EU membership track or offered a conciliatory "special partnership" status?