

# ***Cultural Diplomacy and the Debate on Turkey's Accession to the EU***

By Johanna Können

## **Can cultural diplomacy help get Turkey into the European Union?**

Within the EU, Turkey's accession process is a highly debated issue. Almost everyone seems to have an opinion on the matter, although it can be argued that most of these opinions are not based on rationality and facts. Instead, wrong or misinterpreted perceptions of the country conveyed to the public by the media and anti-Turkish politicians alike are the foundations for many opinions. It is therefore important to obtain a balanced and educated picture of Turkey that is based on knowledge and information in order to overcome the problematic emotionalized debate. Cultural diplomacy can serve as a means of gaining more insight into and comprehension about the matter and to gradually change the negative public perception into a less prejudiced one.

## **The historical background of Turkish – EU relations**

Since the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey has become one of the few pluralist secular democracies in the Muslim world. The country began to gear its political, economic and social reforms towards those of Western Europe in the eighteenth century and has since aligned itself closely by becoming a member of the UN, NATO, the OECD, the Council of Europe and (as an associate member) the Western European Union. Based on the media coverage, one might get the impression that EU-Turkish relations have been placed in the center of attention only relatively recently. However, Turkey's initial application for EU (at that time "European Economic Community") membership dates back to July 1959. Consequently, the EEC and Ankara negotiated and signed the so-called "Ankara Agreement" in September 1963, which made Turkey an associate member of the Community and sought to establish a customs union. In 1970, the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement set a timeframe of twenty-two years for the abolition of tariffs and quotas on goods traded between Turkey and the EEC. Yet the Additional Protocol was never fully implemented and, after the military coup in Turkey in 1980, relations saw a temporary stop. So it was not until April 1987 when Turkey

submitted its application for full ECC membership. Although the European Commission answered in December of 1989 by confirming eventual Turkish membership, it adjourned the matter to a later point in time, referring to Turkey's unstable economic and political situation as well as to its poor relations with Greece and the conflict over Cyprus as an unfavorable basis to start negotiations. Hence, it was only after the completion of the EU-Turkish customs union in 1995 and the Helsinki European Council in 1999 that Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate country on equal footing with the other candidate countries. By October 2004 the European Commission reported that Turkey fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria and was therefore eligible for accession negotiations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, accession negotiations were opened on 3 October 2005. However, they were closed in June 2006 because of a disagreement over the status of Cyprus. Today it is estimated that Turkey will probably not enter the EU before 2021 due to extensive reforms that still have to be carried out.

### **Public opinion towards Turkish membership**

According to the Eurobarometer opinion poll of November 2008, fewer than half of the EU population favors further enlargement of the Union in the near future (47%, which is in fact 1% higher than in 2007). Four out of ten oppose the idea (39%). When specifically asked for their opinion on Turkish membership of the EU, the respondents rank Turkey as the least-favored accession country, with only 31% supporting and 55% opposing membership (14% are undecided). However, 45 of the respondents are in favor of Turkish accession once it has fulfilled all the necessary criteria, while equally 45% remain opposed even if fulfillment of the criteria were the case (leaving 10% undecided). There is an increase of 6% on the side of the supporters for membership in comparison to 2006 though, when only 39% would have accepted Turkey after the criteria were fulfilled. The people most opposed to such an enlargement are to be found in Austria (16% in favor), Luxemburg (32%), France and Germany (both 35%). However, from the Turkish perspective public support of enlargement in general has gained nine percentage points and ranks now at 52%. Regarding its own accession, 55% of the Turks are in favor if Turkey fulfils

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, (COM2005)290 final -

[http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/docs/ia\\_2005/sec\\_2005\\_0891\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/docs/ia_2005/sec_2005_0891_en.pdf) (9.1.2009)

the requirements (61% back membership without this condition). Interesting to note here is that in some countries, EU member states and candidate countries alike, support for Turkish membership is higher than in Turkey itself: 64% of Romanians, 67% of Dutch and 71% of Swedes support Turkish EU membership. As for the candidate countries, 61% of the respondents from Croatia, 80% of the Turkish Cypriot Community and 85% in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia approve.<sup>2</sup> As these recent statistical findings show, there is no common stance as to whether Turkey should join the EU or not within the European public. Politicians do not agree on a common position either, which makes the topic one of the most highly debated issues within EU politics.

Politicians from France and Austria that opposed to Turkish EU accession recently announced that they wanted to initiate referenda in their respective countries on the issue of Turkey's accession. It is no secret that the current French administration is not eager to see Turkey in the EU. The administration announced in 2008 its intention to amend the French Constitution in a way that would necessitate a referendum on enlargement if the country in question harbored more than 5% of the EU's total population (a stipulation that would definitely affect Turkey). However, when France took over EU presidency in mid-2008, and after international disapproval, Sarkozy abandoned the proposed reform and altered the Constitution in a way that forbids referenda, which will most likely enable Croatia to be granted accession and will eventually be beneficial to Turkey as well. Sarkozy changed his approach on the matter after consulting and siding with Secretary of State for European Affairs Jean-Pierre Jouyet, who argued that the initially planned provision would also make it more difficult for other countries to join later<sup>3</sup>. Not long after the French debate on a referendum on Turkey's membership, Austria announced its intention to initiate a referendum on the matter as well. During Austria's 2008 election campaign, the centrist coalition parties proclaimed their agreement on a national referendum should the accession talks favor Turkish membership. If this happened, it is quite likely (given the figures mentioned earlier) that the Austrian

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<sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer Standard 69 (November 2008) -

[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69\\_part3\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_part3_en.pdf) (9.1.2009)

<sup>3</sup> Euractiv 3.4.2008 - <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/sarkozy-turn-turkey-referendum/article-171300> (9.1.2009)

population would eventually deny Turkey entrance into the EU. After the elections, these parties did not rule out the option to hold referenda on future EU treaties, which continues to make a referendum over Turkey possible. Yet the referendum issue has remained rather symbolic until today, since firstly it is unlikely that negotiations with Turkey will accelerate before 2014, and secondly, because Austria has already ratified the Lisbon Treaty and currently there are no other EU accords pending. Furthermore, the new rule requires both parties to accede to a referendum, which gives the People's Party a veto right (the new provision was demanded by the Social Democrats).<sup>4</sup>

### **The role of Cultural Diplomacy**

Although the threats of putting the 'Turkey question' to a referendum were anticipated and did not have an influence on the ongoing negotiations, they do have repercussions. What the discussion shows is that there is apparently a general sentiment of scepticism towards Turkey among many EU member states. This is due to a number of reasons that could all be categorized under the heading "lack of knowledge". First, anti-European politicians and private actors take advantage of the influence of the press, which is in many cases eager to publish populist and Europhobic coverage (after all, bad press sells better than good press). The link between populist politicians and Europhobic media adds up to a powerful symbiosis. Furthermore, within most of the EU countries, citizens lack consistent and authentic information about Turkey in general and the potential benefits EU membership would imply for both sides. As there is no credible political debate held publicly about the issue (apart from the recurrent pseudo-intellectual debates on TV), EU citizens often obtain a very adulterated picture of the whole matter left un-rectified by those in charge in the EU or the member states. It is hardly surprising that a lot of people do not approve or are actually afraid of Turkey being integrated into the EU, given the fact that they are constantly suggested that Turkey does not fit into the EU since it is "too different" or would unleash some kind of "clash of civilizations".<sup>5</sup> It is at this point that cultural diplomacy can be a helpful tool in overcoming unjustified fears and

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<sup>4</sup> Euractiv 25.8.2008 - <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/austria-signals-referendum-turkey-eu-accession/article-174868> (9.1.2009)

<sup>5</sup> Today's Zaman, 9.10.2004 - <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=12863> (9.1.2009)

negative sentiments. As a matter of fact, there are already a considerable amount of measures to enhance the Euro-Turkish relationship, especially at the bilateral level. Germany, as the country with the largest number of Turks outside Turkey and the corresponding close bonds provides some good examples for forms of cultural diplomacy to overcome prejudice on both sides.

One way to tackle the issue is to do it from an artistic angle. “Literatürk”, a Turkish-German Literature Festival which took place in Essen for the fourth time in 2008<sup>6</sup> was initiated by a cultural exchange association there in 2005. It aims to provide cultural opportunities for excursions for the populace with a Turkish background. Designed especially for the second and third generation of migrants, the festival draws attention to the wide variety of Turkish and German-Turkish culture and art in Germany. Additionally, the initiators felt that Turkish-German authors and those of Turkish descent are still underrepresented within the contemporary market for literature. With this in mind, the organizers want to provide a forum for this kind of literature in order to establish its authors in the German literature business. By doing so, they emphasize that German-Turkish writing is not only about the difficulties of autobiographical framing of identity but also, other styles and contents build this kind of literature, as with any other form of art. A similar festival takes place in Hamburg under the title “Jung, türkisch, Almanya – Das Festival deutsch-türkischer Literatur”, where readings of literature by young Turkish or German-Turkish authors takes place alongside discussions and poetry slams related to the essential question “Was lebst du?” (“What do you live?”). The festival is directed towards young people in particular, generally focusing on their respective living areas within Hamburg, a city with a big share of immigrants<sup>7</sup>. Another cultural event with similar intentions was held in Berlin during September and November 2008. “Berlin türkis – Festival deutsch-türkischen Entertainments” was designed to provide a stage for German-Turkish entertainers to portray their way of life in Germany in a humorous manner and to share and exchange their experiences with Germans and German-Turks alike<sup>8</sup>. These are just a few examples of the many cultural events, both small and

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<sup>6</sup> Literatürk – Das türkisch-deutsche Literaturfestival – [www.literatuerk.de](http://www.literatuerk.de) (9.1.2009)

<sup>7</sup> Jung, türkisch, Almanya – Das Festival deutsch-türkischer Literatur - [http://www.iba-hamburg.de/de/04\\_info/3\\_kalender/index.php?we\\_objectID=2152&year=2007](http://www.iba-hamburg.de/de/04_info/3_kalender/index.php?we_objectID=2152&year=2007) (9.1.2009)

<sup>8</sup> Festival berlin türkis - <http://www.eventguide-berlin.de/grusswort.htm> (9.1.2009)

large, which have been initiated recently throughout Germany to strengthen the German-Turkish relationship and to deepen the understanding of the cultural background.

Another form of art that can be categorized as a form of cultural diplomacy would be film. Movies directed by German-Turkish filmmakers are often referred to as belonging to the “Turkish-German Cinema”<sup>9</sup> and a lot of them touch upon trans-cultural issues. A famous example is director Fatih Akın who has gained an international reputation for covering the destinies of German-Turks in his stories. The history of this genre goes back to the 1970s and 1980s when authors like Aran Ören and filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder engaged themselves with the range of problems related to migration. In 1984 filmmaker Tevfik Başer released “40 qm Deutschland”, a highly praised movie about life as a guest worker in Germany and about the despair of people who have lost their social connections and are alienated by living in a foreign country. Over time this genre developed along with its creators. Today, second, or third-generation German-Turks depart from telling stories about migration, preferring to depict their own situation: being stuck somewhere between Germany and Turkey (mentally, culturally, etc.) and struggling to find their unique identity within this confusion. As the appreciation of this genre grows, so does the spectrum of topics the films cover. Arranged weddings, homosexual migrants in Germany or the role of migrant women are some examples, not to mention the comedic outlooks on German-Turkish interaction in everyday life. In 2004, after Fatih Akın’s “Gegen die Wand” (“Head-On”) won several awards in Europe, German-Turkish Cinema was well-known on an international stage. Obviously, the high amount of input from both the German and the Turkish side in artistic projects can serve as a tool for mutual understanding and rapprochement.

Another example of cultural diplomacy between Germany and Turkey are school and academic exchanges. More and more German high schools offer exchange programs with Turkish high schools, and for some time, it has been possible to take Turkish classes at some German high schools. The best-known way of exchange is the Erasmus program, which enables both students and teachers of universities to go

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<sup>9</sup> Löser, C. – Berlin am Bosphorus, Spielarten und Hintergründe des deutsch-türkischen Kinos - <http://film-dienst.kim-info.de/artikel.php?nr=150793&dest=frei&pos=artikel> (9.1.2009)

abroad and spend several semesters at either a Turkish or German university. This ranks among the strongest means of cultural diplomacy, as it offers its participants a unique opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the other country's culture and way of life. The Erasmus program has proven to be quite successful, and rising participant figures can be taken as proof. During the academic year 2005/2006, Turkey hosted a total of 828 students from the EU and EFTA countries, of which 210 were Germans. In return, 2,852 Turkish students went abroad, 691 studying in Germany. In the following year numbers rose, in the academic year 2006/2007, Turkey hosted 1,321 foreign students, this time 337 of them coming from Germany. In exchange, 4,438 Turks went abroad, this time 905 to Germany<sup>10</sup>. A milestone in German-Turkish academic cooperation was laid in 2007, when the newly founded German-Turkish "Ernst-Reuter-Initiative für Dialog und Verständigung zwischen den Kulturen" took over a project to build a German-Turkish university in Istanbul. This project has evoked enthusiasm among politicians, businessmen, media representatives and artists in both countries, Both Foreign Ministers (Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Ali Babacan, respectively) have supported the project personally. Relating to this, Mr. Steinmeier and Dr. Rita Süßmuth (retired President of the German Bundestag) declared that this project could have an impact beyond its academic borders, against parallel societies and against the asserted incompatibility of the religions and cultures.<sup>11</sup> Another exchange project is a school exchange project originated under the Leadership Initiative of the Germany Meets Turkey Young Leader program. Benjamin Didszuweit, a member of Germany Meets Turkey in 2007, implemented his idea of a school partnership between Paul Klee Gymnasium in Overath/Cologne and Kadiköy Anadolu Lisesi, Kadiköy/Istanbul. He believes that programs like this are examples of cultural diplomacy being "the most effective way for a society to change any negative perceptions it may have of other cultures".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission, Education and Training, Erasmus Statistics - [http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/erasmus/stat\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/erasmus/stat_en.html) (9.1.2009)

<sup>11</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, 8.3.2007, "Plädoyer für eine deutsch-türkische Universität" - <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Infoservice/Presse/Interviews/2007/070308-DtTrUniversitaet.html> (9.1.2009)

<sup>12</sup> CD News, Turkey & Germany: Building bridges - <http://www.culturaldiplomacynews.org:80/index.php?aid=991> (9.1.2009); Germany Meets Turkey - <http://www.germanymeetsturkey.org/index.php?id=76> (9.1.2009)

All these examples show that what is vital in the discussion about whether Turkey belongs to the EU or not is knowledge. Once people gain knowledge about Turkey, its people and its culture, they might understand the whole process that surrounds the issue better and they would be able to obtain a realistic picture of the country. Europeans should make their arguments about Turkish entry into the EU – either pro or con – based on these interactions rather than on popular stereotypes perpetrated by those with only distant experience. All the means of cultural diplomacy mentioned can help in fostering and spreading this knowledge together with a sense of understanding of each other. Establishing close personal relations should be the focal point here, since this will lead to constant, repeated intercultural contact and can help overcome and avoid misunderstandings. Of course, cultural diplomacy alone is not sufficient in trying to alter the picture the wider public has about the Turkey-EU debate. Politicians and media representatives also have to become more active in educating the public, providing them with a more coherent and balanced picture about the issue. Everyone be asked to contribute to more transparency and rationality in the debate, which can only benefit all parties involved.

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