

Borjan Tanevski Scholarship Competition Paper:



**“Would it be in the interest of South-East Europe if Turkey became a member of the European Union?”**

Nderim Rudi

American College of Thessaloniki  
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“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.”

– John F. Kennedy, former president of the United States of America

## **“Is it in the interest of Southeast Europe if Turkey is accepted in the EU?”**

### **Introduction**

The old dream of a united Europe might have sounded as a romantic idea not long ago, but today it is present and stronger than ever. The full integration into the European Union is the interest of Southeast European countries, and European security enhanced by peace in the Balkans is a direct interest of the EU. This is where the interests of the present EU members and the SE European countries meet, while Turkish integration rises as one of the issues to discuss. In the light of many dynamic processes Southeast Europe is undergoing, many questions are raised. While the European Union struggles with the issue of Turkey's acceptance, the aspiring SE European countries consider what their interests are in case of such an event. Public opinion in some SE European countries might be against such integration, but elsewhere not very interested. Still, everyone is aware that in the advent of such a day, everybody will be affected. After conducting research on the issue, my understanding and conclusions are as follows.

### **Turkish Integration into EU as seen from the perspective of EU standards**

In order to be more practical in looking at the possible Turkish accession into the European Union, it is necessary to have an outline of standards Turkey needs to fulfill before joining the EU. This will provide a broader perspective to use when looking at the interests of Southeast European countries on the issue. It has been accepted that democracy and stability in Turkey is a strategic interest for the whole of Europe. But, before Europe opens its gates to Turkey's 80 million people, Turkey needs to show reliability. Before the EU liberalizes the market for Turkish products and opens a new market for its existing member states, Turkey needs to pass an exam: an exam of democracy in which human and cultural rights will be the foundation of a liberal, open and diverse society.

Therefore, before being realistically considered, Turkey needs to fight its long standing policies and practices related to human rights issues. Part of the problem arises from the commitment to maintain an absolutely secular state. Turkey needs to acknowledge the Kurdish problem by taking

bold steps towards solving this matter and giving the Kurds their rights as cited in relevant UN documents. Turkey will have to show moderate politics and try all it can do to solve the issue of Cyprus. The European Union insists that any aspiring country will have to solve such political problems related with one of its members. Last, but not least, they will have to reorganize the economy, so their economy will be fit for entering a union of free market economies.

Other, less official but publicly talked about, concerns of the EU, are a possible flood of immigration to Western Europe and the issue of religion. Even if some western countries need some immigrants for their economies' needs, they would be completely out of control of the situation in the event of massive immigration. The very public concern is the fact that from the Turkish membership, a largely Christian Europe is merging with a largely Muslim country. Although these are obstacles of a different kind, they matter in public debates because of the fear from global terrorism, which is related to extremist Islam.

Besides the standards Turkey needs to fulfill before joining EU, it is important to mention that Turkey was accepted as a candidate for the EU in 1999. Six years have passed since then! Based on this fact and all factors mentioned above, we could make a prediction. That is, in the best case it would take a decade for Turkey to be accepted into the EU. Such timing predictions are important for every country in South East European region, and will be considered when looking at their interests related to the possible Turkish integration in the EU.

### **Turkish Integration into the EU, as seen from the perspective of Greece**

As a student in Greece, one is bound to listen to news and discussions about Turkey in all aspects of political interest, be that national, ethnic and economic or be it in the integration processes in the EU. The further away you go from the Turkish bordering country of Greece, the less you can listen to debates about any of these issues. Naturally and historically, one can say, an immediate neighbor shares more direct interests. Even more often, a neighbor has 'problems with' and shares 'the problems' of their bordering country. In the same time, Greece is the only state in the region that is a full member of the European Union. Hence I believe that when looking at such an issue, Greece

should be considered in a different and unique way compared to other respective Southeast European countries.

Hardships in the relations between Greece and Turkey are rooted in the historical past and shaped by the current implications related with the real world issues. Under Ottoman occupation for more than 3 centuries, the Greek people still have not forgotten. Furthermore, this conflict stands on the backstage of the more modern conflict of Cyprus. An obstacle in the relations between the two countries, this issue is one of the main factors in determining Turkey's chances of integration. It seems that Turkey has taken some bold steps in this direction when it fully supported a UN plan for political settlement. The Greek governing elite is under constant pressure from the public opinion because of these political matters. In recent years some important diplomatic moves from both sides have brought the two countries closer to each other. The result is a softened conflict and an opportunity for more cooperation. On the way of political conflict, a more important and decisive question that rises up is the economics of the new era of political relations.

With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the politics and economics of this region made a sharp turn. Although many suffered, such a turn proved positive for both the Greek and Turkish economies, because they had a more direct access to a vast market. Continuous competition by the cheaper Turkish products was present in this regional market. It is clear that because of many differences in the level of living, time has played a role and brought advantages and disadvantages into the surface. Turkey has the advantage of cheap labor and closer access to crucial natural resources. This in turn caused cheaper prices that proved competitive in this market tired of conflicts.

All along, Turkey has shown a strong competitor in Greece's strategic economic sectors such as agriculture, tourism and services. Greece has engaged in trade with the region and broader, by maintaining quality of products as the primary goal. A particular advantage is the ownership of some of the strategic economic components of its northern and western neighbor countries like Albania, FYR of Macedonia and Bulgaria. But in light of new developments, it seems the business worlds from both sides have been taken by surprise and find themselves late in joining a new trend. That is the grandest process of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the process of globalization. With the recent trends, everyone has realized that they should concentrate on their niche, or what they do best. This is a

necessity for a producer of a good or service within a market, and it is true for countries as well. Globalization is advancing with huge steps and it is changing the world we live in. Because of this reason, political groups have not had the pressure that business interests in the market economy put on their governments.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned facts, some kind of political and economical myopia was present. But both sides seem to have finally woken up. Because Greece is a member of the EU, they hold the powerful tool of the veto on the possible accession of Turkey in EU. Greece has given its 'go' to this process. As a result, Turkey will act in closer and direct debate with Greece towards fulfilling the EU standards. Finally, one can say, both sides are looking at such issues as a part of the bigger puzzle.

### **Turkish integration into EU, as seen from the perspective of South East European countries**

Southeast Europe is located at the heart of Europe, and it is the artery of connection between the East and West. This region is characterized by many small different states with a long history of hostilities stretching to our modern days. A pool of different nations, cultures and religions, this part of the world has been anything but an example of cooperation and understanding. In the face of big changes that are taking place to human society and the world, today these countries look at the common perspective of integration in the most unprecedented union of countries history knows, the European Union. We know the Greek state is interested to look in detail into the process of Turkish integration into the EU. But evidently, other respective Southeast European countries are interested as well. Namely, countries like Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, FYR of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro as constituent parts of the region might want to take a closer look into this matter. But, how can one answer with one simple answer and one voice, while taking into account all the historical, ethnic, social and economical differences these countries have? Such a complicated issue, taken from such a complicated point of view, can be seen clearer only by oversimplifying things and giving proposals in thick lines.

For countries like Albania and Bosnia, a step by the European Union such as the acceptance of Turkey would be a clear signal that they would not be judged because the majority of the population

belongs to the Muslim faith. Bulgaria would be encouraged because of it being in the same applicants group with Turkey, and would as such be in the pro-acceptance side of the coin having aspirations such as a similar consideration in no time. FYR of Macedonia, which has a minority of Albanian and Turkish Muslims, could diplomatically use their minorities' support for their own integration. Thus in the case of Macedonia, Turkey's accession would mean a new supportive partner in the hard process of EU integration. Still, although for countries like Serbia Montenegro and Croatia, this action would not have a direct meaning, a principle that stands for them and all the rest is very strong. Keeping a non-integrated enclave, a separate Europe in between a politically, economically and geographic Europe divided in two is not a goal of the European Union. Neither is this possible in the view of the aspiring South East European countries. In the light of new developments, national and common regional priorities should be combined to fit the integration processes that everybody is part of.

The politics of the last decade or so has resulted not in the organization of an open regional market, but rather a group of economies directed towards exporting their products in the markets of the European Union. In the economic sense, a European Turkey could give the final signal of seriousness on the side of the EU, and provide a pretext for reorganizing the markets towards a pre-integrated integration of the region within itself. Southeast European countries, by reorganizing and liberalizing their markets for each other's products, can cause a cyclical reaction of economic wellbeing. That will be an incentive to the EU that the region is economically viable. The financial inputs of the Union in this case would be vital, and most probably available through mechanisms such as the Stability Pact.

For political circles in power in the region, a step such as the Turkish integration into the European Union would set the very much needed conclusion that EU responds to incentives. Those who do take the steps and work towards fulfilling the standards will truly be accepted in the club. Hopefully, that would awaken some sleeping politicians who are left behind the modern trends because of their ideas. That should be a clear message to them that the dawn of new era for the region has started.

## **Conclusion**

When taking into account the number of interests and the interested, be them the government, businesses, or the simple people, one realizes the limits to the possibility of representing them all. Still, we can make assumptions based on the only long lasting policies of democratic states: the wellbeing of their people, that is human and business interests. What some time ago could be perceived as economic threat from Turkish products is now a threat from Chinese products. Maybe it is not a threat, but it is a call for opening the eyes to see that the process of globalization is happening in front of our eyes. In a new era of political relations between Greece and Turkey, peaceful solution to the problem of Cyprus is to be expected. We have clearly seen that for countries like Albania, Bulgaria, FYR of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia, and Croatia, Turkish integration into EU means an increase in the velocity on their own integration. Being part of a supra-national Europe, ultimately involves a certain supra-national understanding of politics and international relations by any country wishing to join the club. What does it mean to be part of the European Union? It means that the final result of these hard integration processes should be liberal, open, diverse and tolerant societies with the capacity to survive in the new global market. Could any of the SE European states do this alone? No. Could Turkey as a crucial part of the region help? Yes. Is it then in the interest of South East Europe that Turkey be accepted into the European Union? Yes, it is.

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