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Turkey Watch: EU Member States' Perceptions on Turkey's Accession to the EU

Edited By:

Sait Akşit, Özgehan Şenyuva, Çiğdem Üstün



Strengthening and Integrating Academic Networks



Center for European Studies



Middle East Technical University

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Contents

Sait Akşit, Çiğdem Üstün

Introduction: In Search of an EU-wide Debate on Turkey.....1

Nicolas Monceau

French Perceptions.....9

Katrin Böttger, Eva-Maria Maggi

German Perceptions.....22

Yvonne Nasshoven

Belgian Perceptions.....34

Emiliano Alessandri with Sebastiano Sali

Italian Perceptions.....44

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Irene García

Spanish Perceptions.....58

Athanasios C. Kotsiaros

Greek Perceptions72

Gunilla Herolf

Swedish Perceptions83

Cengiz Günay

Austrian Perceptions94

Costas Melakopides

Greek Cypriot Perceptions105

Petr Kratochvíl, David Král, Dominika Dražilová

Czech Perceptions120

Adam Szymański

Polish Perceptions133

Iulia Serafimescu, Mihai Sebe

Romanian Perceptions151

Marin Lessenski

Bulgarian Perceptions165

Özgehan Şenyuva, Sait Akşit

Turkey Seen from the EU: Conclusions176

Notes on Contributors188

Petr Kratochvíl, David Král, Dominika Dražilová*

Czech Perceptions

Abstract

The article explores the political and societal discourses in the Czech Republic that pertain to Turkey's EU membership. While most political parties express their lukewarm support for the accession, the topic certainly does not constitute an important part of their foreign policy agenda. The issue is also only seldom discussed in the media or in the academia. Czech citizens, even though more than forty % of them support the enlargement, have a low level of knowledge about Turkey and their indifference directly reflects the absent deliberation about the issue in the society at large.

Introduction: the Four Limitations of the Discourse and Their Corollaries

The Czech debate about the Turkish membership in the EU is limited in four ways. First, after 2004, the Czech Republic became one of the few EU member states that are surrounded by other EU members only (i.e. that have no sea border). The geographic location exerts considerable influence on Czech discussions about further enlargement since it is often portrayed as geographically distant, with little direct impact on the lives of Czech citizens. This applies equally to the Czech attitude towards Eastern Europe (which is geographically still closer than Turkey) and the Balkans.

* The opinions expressed herein are only those of the author and do not reflect any institutional views.

Second, the geographic distance from membership candidates, including Turkey, is complemented by the limited historical experience with Turkey. Even though the Czech Lands were part of the Austrian Empire at the time of the Ottoman expansion into Central Europe, the territory of the current Czech Republic has never been part of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, unlike in the case of Hungary or Austria, not to mention the Balkans, there are no historical stereotypes or prejudices worth mentioning in the case of Turkey.

Third, it is not only the lack of historical contacts, but also the absence of Turkish migrants in the country that sets the Czech Republic apart from other countries from the same region that have sizeable Turkish minorities (Germany, Austria, etc.).¹ In addition, the common (if flawed) conflation of the Turkish minority with Muslims in general that is often used by the opponents of the Turkish EU membership has a rather limited potential in the Czech Republic since the numbers of Muslims residing in the country are nigh negligible.

Fourth, the discussions about Turkey are usually seen as part of the larger enlargement debate. Yet this debate pertains to countries like Ukraine or Serbia, which play a much bigger role in the minds of ordinary Czechs. This is the case due to a number of factors, including a common (Communist) past, geographical proximity or – as in the case of Croatia – huge numbers of Czech tourists visiting these countries. As Czechs are very much in favour of the Croatian membership and they generally count as supporters of further enlargement to Eastern Europe, the possible negative attitudes toward Turkey's accession may be hidden behind the general acceptance of further enlargement.

¹ Turks do not even appear on the list of the eighteen most numerous ethnic groups living in the Czech Republic. Cf. the data of the Czech Statistical Office at <http://www.czso.cz/csu/2003edicniplan.nsf/p/4114-03>.

This state of affairs has two significant consequences which heavily impact the Czech debate on the Turkish accession. The first is that since the debate is not really widespread among the populace, it stays only at the level of high politics, with an occasional spill-over into the academia. As a consequence, it is virtually impossible to find any consistent and detailed coverage of issues regarding EU-Turkey relations either in the media or in the civil society. The second corollary pertains to the originality of arguments used in the debate. As we noted above, there are no signs of a deeper societal deliberation on the issue, which also translates into the dependence on the arguments used by external sources.

This can be nicely shown by analysing the only visible campaign against the Turkish membership in the Czech Republic. The campaign, launched in the summer of 2005, was not organised locally, but by an international initiative called Voice for Europe, and its aim was to collect signatures of those who generally oppose the Turkish accession and, more specifically, reject the start of accession negotiations with Turkey.² Josef Zeleniec (EPP), one of the most vocal Czech opponents of Turkey in the EU, and a member of the European Parliament, immediately expressed his support for the initiative.³

The lukewarm attitudes to the Turkish accession are also reflected in the results of public opinion polls. The number of opponents among the citizens of the Czech Republic seems to be fairly constant – from 51 % in the Spring 2005 Eurobarometer poll to 49 % three years later.⁴ According

² *Kampaň proti vstupu Turecka do Evropské unie* [online]. Econnect, 23.8.2005 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.zpravodajstvi.ecn.cz/index.stm?x=481540>

³ *Voice for Europe v Bruselu proti vstupu Turecka do EU* [online]. 2005 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.zieleniec.eu/index.php?dok=0083000000299,det The initiative stopped working (its original website <http://www.eu-turkey.info/> does not exist anymore).

⁴ *Eurobarometr 63,4* [online]. Jaro 2005 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63_nat_cz.pdf *Eurobarometer 69*

to Eurobarometer, the number of those who are in favour of Turkey in the EU has been slowly rising to the current 43 %.⁵ Even though the polls do not explore the relative relevance of the question to the interviewees or ascertain the level of knowledge the respondents have about the issue, some indication is the decline from 12 to 8 % of those who do not have any opinion about the question.⁶

Political Parties

Regarding the Czech political scene, the issue of the Turkish membership was sometimes mentioned in the context of the Czech EU Presidency, for instance when negotiations on the chapter on taxation were opened in June 2009. Due to the unexpected upheavals in the domestic politics in April 2009 and the following creation of the caretaker government, it is not possible to divide our analysis into a discussion of the opinions of the government and the opposition. Therefore, we will focus on the positions of the individual political parties and actors.

The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) is probably the parliamentary party that is consistently the most favourably disposed towards the Turkish accession. The arguments concerning Turkey can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the ODS, as the party that generally opposes further European integration, sees the Turkish membership as a chance to decelerate this process. Secondly, the ODS argues that the accession negotiations may require reforms on both sides, which means that within the EU this may include the reform of the agricultural and regional policy

[online]. March-May 2008 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_part3_en.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ At the end of May 2009, a national poll conducted by a local polling agency that does not allow for the “no opinion” answer came up with somewhat different results, with a larger majority (62 %) against the Turkish accession. Cf. <http://img1.ct24.cz/multimedia/documents/9/900/89917.doc>.

for which the Civic Democrats are calling. Thirdly, the ODS refuses the idea of the EU as a Christian club and proposes the EU's deeper involvement in the Muslim world. In this context, the accession of Turkey can be seen as the first step towards better ties with the Muslim countries.⁷ Finally, the Civic Democratic Party is strongly Atlanticist, and therefore the support of the Turkish European bid not only by the former US President George W. Bush but recently also by the current US President Barack Obama may represent an important argument in shaping the policy towards Turkey. Nevertheless, the ODS stresses the need for continuity in Turkey's reform process as well as the strict adherence to the Copenhagen criteria.

Among the most active participants in the debate are party members Jan Zahradil, Mirek Topolánek and Miroslav Ouzký.⁸ Especially Jan Zahradil is known for his efforts in promoting the issue of the Turkish membership. Zahradil, who strongly opposes the concept of the privileged partnership, assumes that the Czech Republic, due to its lack of a Turkish minority and absence of past conflicts with Turkey, may serve as a mediator for the Turkish European aspirations.⁹ In 2008 during his official visit to Ankara, Mirek Topolánek described the relations between the Czech Republic and Turkey as friendly and above standard, adding that the Czech Republic supports a full membership for Turkey¹⁰ and fosters the opening of new chapters of the *acquis* during the Czech Presidency.

⁷ Král, D. *Česká debata o perspektivách členství Turecka a Ukrajiny v EU*, EUROPEUM, 2006. Available from www.europeum.org/doc/pdf/858.pdf

⁸ Mirek Topolánek, chairman of ODS, served as Prime Minister from August 2006 until May 2009. Jan Zahradil and Miroslav Ouzký are members of the European Parliament.

⁹ *Česká republika podporuje vstup Turecka do Evropské unie* [online]. CT24, 15.11.2007 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.ct24.cz/o-cem-se-mluvi/4355-ceska-republika-podporuje-vstup-turecka-do-evropske-unie/

¹⁰ *Premiér M. Topolánek v turecké Ankaře podpořil vstup Turecka do Evropské unie* [online]. Vláda ČR, 8.10.2008 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=43090

On the other end of the spectrum, the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) is the parliamentary party with the most critical attitude towards the Turkish accession. However, its stance can be rather defined as reserved than as a complete refusal. The position of KDU-ČSL is inspired by the perspective of other Christian and Democratic parties within the EU, especially that of the German CDU/CSU. Although KDU-ČSL acknowledges the importance of Turkey for Europe, its members prefer other forms of cooperation with it than the full Turkish membership, which they believe is inconsistent with the fundamental nature of the EU. The debate concerning the Turkish European bid includes several arguments. First, Turkey is not seen as "European" in the cultural and social sense. Second, so the argument goes, the accession of a Muslim country might lead towards a change of the identity of the Union as a community based on Christian values. Third, Turkey still does not fulfil the Copenhagen criteria and its low level of protection of human rights is criticised. Finally, it is believed that the fragile balance within the EU would be disturbed by the presence of another big member state.¹¹

However, in 2005 a prominent member of the party, Cyril Svoboda¹², stated in his answer to a critical article¹³ by Josef Zieleniec¹⁴ that the accession negotiations were an open process with uncertain results, which may not necessarily lead to a full membership for Turkey.¹⁵ Other Christian Democrat politicians active in the discussion are the MEPs Jan

¹¹ Král 2006.

¹² Cyril Svoboda is chairman of KDU-ČSL, former Minister for Regional Development and former Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹³ Published in *Právo* on 1.9.2005.

¹⁴ Former member of the European Parliament.

¹⁵ *EU potřebuje impuls v podobě Turecka* [online]. 10.9.2005 [cit. 2009-05-30]. Available from www.cyrilsvoboda.cz/index.php?option=com_ontent&task=view&id=63&Itemid=49

Březina and Zuzana Roithová (both EPP).¹⁶ Both of them opposed the opening of the accession negotiations.

The Green Party (SZ) supports the integration of Turkey into the EU¹⁷, but on the whole, the party's participation in the debate over the issue of the Turkish accession is rather limited. However, the Green Party's envoy and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg made several statements on this matter. Schwarzenberg doesn't recognise the problem of the non-European identity of Turkey, and according to him Turkey has much in common with Europe thanks to its Byzantine heritage.¹⁸ In January 2009 Schwarzenberg reaffirmed his support for the Turkish accession and highlighted its strategic importance.¹⁹ On a more cautious note, Schwarzenberg stressed that the reforms in Turkey needed new impulses in April 2009 and urged Turkish representatives to continue with the reform policy.²⁰

The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), which is one of the two major elements in the Czech party system (the other one being the ODS), is also supportive regarding the accession of Turkey; this support can be partly explained by the strategy adopted by the European Social Democratic parties, which stresses the need for stability and prosperity within Europe and the necessity of the consolidation of the democratic character of Turkey. However, Social Democrats see a potential problem

¹⁶ Miroslav Kalousek, former chairman of KDU-ČSL, served as Minister of Finances until May 2009. Roman Línek is former vice-chairman of KDU-ČSL. Jan Březina and Zuzana Roithová are members of the European Parliament.

¹⁷ Berdych, A., Nekvapil, V. *Česká zahraniční politika a volby 2006*, AMO, 2006, p. 30.

¹⁸ *Turecký advokát* [online]. 26.11.2007 [cit. 2009-05-25]. Available from www.zeleni.cz/7054/clanek/turecky-advokat/

¹⁹ *Schwarzenberg: Turecko musí kvůli přiblížení k EU urychlit reformy* [online]. 22.4.2009 [cit. 2009-05-25]. Available from www.rozhlas.cz/evropskaunie/zpravodajstvi/_zprava/573559.

²⁰ *Klaus: Podporuji vstup Turecka do EU* [online]. 30.4.2009 [cit. 2009-06-25]. Euroscop. Available from www.euroskop.cz/38/11824/clanek/klaus-podporuji-vstup-turecka-do-eu/

in the fact that an accession of a large, mostly agricultural country can slow down the integration process and also radically change the institutional balance in the EU.²¹

One of the first politicians from the Czech Social Democratic Party to express his views about the Turkish membership was Vladimír Špidla, who, already in 2003, claimed that the Czech Republic agrees with the Turkish European bid. Later, Špidla articulated his anxiety about the potential “Orientalization” of Turkey in the context of the non-opening of the accession negotiations. The favourable attitude towards the Turkish membership is shared by other prominent Social Democrats, such as Stanislav Gross and Jiří Paroubek.²²

The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) doesn't contribute often to the debate over the Turkish membership in the EU. Nevertheless, all representatives of KSČM in the European Parliament were supporting the opening of the negotiations process, which implies that the party has a favourable stance in regard to this issue.²³

Among other important political actors who may influence the debate over the Turkish membership is President Václav Klaus, who is supportive of the accession as well. After the April 2009 meeting with the Turkish president Abdullah Gül, Klaus again confirmed this view. Being strongly Eurosceptical, Klaus considered the opening and closing of the chapters as a mere “game of the bureaucrats” and as not related to the real Turkish achievements.²⁴

Civil Society and Research Institutions

²¹ Král 2006.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Klaus: Podporuji vstup Turecka do EU [online].

Regarding civil society and research institutions, it is only a handful of think-tanks that have dedicated some attention to the issue. Among those which are more or less supportive of the Turkish accession, the most visible is Europeum²⁵, whose members have written several articles and studies analysing the pros and cons of the Turkish EU membership.²⁶ Also, Europeum is the only think-tank in the country that produced a comprehensive report on the Czech debate about Turkey in the EU.²⁷ Even though the report was released in 2006, large parts of it are still topical. In addition, Europeum is probably the only think-tank to publish in Czech an article by a Turkish author, Seda Domaniç.²⁸ The article forcefully put forward the original argument that the main problem lies in the fact that both sides (the EU and Turkey) believe that the accession of Turkey would be more advantageous for the other side, claiming that in 2006, only one third of Turks and one fifth of EU citizens believed that the accession would be mutually beneficial. Regarding other think-tanks and research institutions, some attention to Turkey can be detected in the Association of International Affairs, where several analysts focus on the country and the region,²⁹ and in the Institute of International Relations.³⁰

The most widely read journal about international relations published in the country, *Mezinárodní politika* (International Politics), released a special issue on “Turkey at the crossroads” in September 2007. Although the focus of the issue was not exclusively on EU-Turkish relations, there were allusions to this problematique scattered throughout the whole

²⁵ The full name is Europeum, the Institute of European Policy, <http://www.europeum.org/index.php?lang=en>.

²⁶ See, for instance, the article written by Lukáš Pachta: http://www.integrace.cz/integrace/koment_zobraz.asp?id=43.

²⁷ Král, D. *Česká debata o perspektivách členství Turecka a Ukrajiny v EU*, EUROPEUM, 2006. Available from www.europeum.org/doc/pdf/858.pdf.

²⁸ Domaniç, S. *Vstup Turecka do Evropské unie: Výhodný pro obě strany? Možný pro obě strany?* EUROPEUM, 2006. Available from www.europeum.org/doc/pdf/864.pdf

²⁹ <http://www.amo.cz/vyzkum/analytici.htm>.

³⁰ www.iir.cz.

issue. In particular, two polemical articles on Turkey's EU entry were published, an approving one by the well-known Czech journalist Zbyněk Petráček, and a more critical one by the conservative thinker Alexandr Tomský.³¹ One article on the issue also appeared in E-Polis, the political science journal of the Czech-Slovak Political Science Students Union in Pilsen.³²

As far as civil society is concerned, deliberations about Turkey are scarce indeed. One exception is the "European Values" NGO. While being in favour of deeper integration, the NGO is critical of Turkey's entry and lobbies for a special partnership rather than a full-fledged membership for it. The organisation also joined the above described campaign against the launch of EU accession negotiations for Turkey.

Media

Among the printed media, only the country's four serious newspapers (*Mladá fronta Dnes*, *Právo*, *Hospodářské noviny*, and *Lidové noviny*) offer a continuous coverage of the issue. All of these focus primarily on reporting news about Turkey and the EU, and analytical reports or commentaries on this issue are not common. Virtually none of the related articles pertain to Czech domestic issues. If we leave aside the space that is given to views of Czech politicians (which we have discussed above), there are only two persistent connections between the Czech Republic and the Turkish accession in the Czech media: (1) news about the latest EU-wide opinion polls, which also include the attitudes of the Czech

³¹Petráček, Z. Turecko na evropské cestě, *Mezinárodní politika*, 9/2007, 20-21. Available from www.iir.cz/upload/MP/MPArchive/2007/MP092007.cel%E9.pdf, Tomský, A. Turecko do Evropy nepatří, *Mezinárodní politika*, 9/2007, 20-21. Available from www.iir.cz/upload/MP/MPArchive/2007/MP092007.celE9.pdf

³²Marešová, S. Cesta Turecka do EU - problematika vstupu [online]. *E-polis.cz*, 6. červen 2008. [cit. 2009-06-15]. Available from www.e-polis.cz/evropska-unie/280-cesta-turecka-do-eu-problematika-vstupu.html

populace towards the Turkish entry, and recently also (2) the role the Czech EU Presidency could play in fostering EU-Turkish relations.

The articles related to EU-Turkish relations usually fall into one of three broad categories.³³ First, there are a lot of reports about the progress in accession negotiations, chapters being opened or blocked, the assessment reports by the European Commission or the criticism levelled against Turkey in some areas, notably human rights and protection of minorities. However, these articles usually do not give any opinion and instead limit themselves to reporting the events.

Second, many articles describe specific bilateral relations that also influence the individual countries' relations to the EU as a whole. For instance, much attention is given to the insistence of the United States that Turkey should be accepted to the EU since it is a reliable ally of the West in NATO.³⁴ The complementary side is described in those articles that deal with other countries' scepticism towards the Turkish membership, most notably that of France. Interestingly, there seems to be a tendency to use a simplified dichotomy of the United States and France as the two poles representing opposite views on Turkey's EU aspirations, with the Czech Republic taking up the middle ground. Also, the vocal role of France, and in particular its President Sarkozy, is sometimes seen as too critical-hence, there are articles discussing how France disagrees with the European Commission or how it "punished" the Swedish EU

³³ The same categories and topics are also present on the main radio stations and TV channels. However, in particular on the Czech Radio, more space is given to the views of Czech politicians (particularly the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the current and former presidents).

³⁴ *Stín summitu: turecké členství v EU* [online]. 5.4.2009 [cit. 2009-06-16]. Lidovky.cz. Available from www.lidovky.cz/stin-summitu-turecke-clenstvi-v-eu-due-/?ln_eu.asp?c=A090405_170326_ln_eu_ter

Presidency for being too positive in its attitudes to Turkey.³⁵ Another example of this kind is that of the relations of Turkey and Greece or Turkey and Cyprus. Sometimes the articles discuss the history of Greek-Turkish and Cypriot-Turkish relations, and in other cases they analyse the Turkish efforts to decouple these from the EU accession.³⁶

The third category covers specific issues: One example is the role Turkey plays in safeguarding EU energy security (the Nabucco pipeline)³⁷; another is the importance Turkey attaches to visa facilitation or even the introduction of a visa-free regime³⁸; sometimes the geostrategic position of Turkey in the wider Middle East and its impact on the EU are discussed as well.

Conclusion

The overall impression from our analysis might evoke a mild optimism regarding the Czech attitudes toward Turkey. However, we believe that some factors curbing this optimism should be mentioned. No matter how supportive of Turkey's membership the biggest political parties are, they are typically not interested in Turkey per se, but rather in some hidden agendas of their own. First, the Civic Democrats, for instance, see the ongoing enlargement process as the best safeguard

³⁵ *Sarkozy zdůraznil: Turecko v EU nechci* [online]. 24.5.2007 [cit. 2009-06-16]. iHned.cz. Available from www.zahranicni.ihned.cz/c4-10149910-21228220-003000_d-sarkozy-zduraznil-turecko-v-eu-nechci.

³⁶ *EU „potrestala“ Turecko za jeho postoj vůči Kypru* [online]. 29.6.2006 [cit. 2009-06-16]. iHned.cz. Available from www.zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-18798680-eu-potrestala-turecko-za-jeho-postoj-vuci-kypru

³⁷ See, for instance, *Turecko kývlo na plynovod Nabucco, Evropa sníží závislost na Rusku* [online]. 8.5.2009 [cit. 2009-06-16]. idnes.cz. Available from www.ekonomika.idnes.cz/turecko-kyvlo-na-plynovod-nabucco-evropa-snizi-zavislost-na-rusku-1fn-/eko-zahranicni.asp?c=A090508_132551_eko-zahranicni_fih

³⁸ Cf. *„Ale hlavně zrušte ta víza“* [online]. 10.12.2008 [cit. 2009-06-16]. lidovky.cz. Available from www.lidovky.cz/ale-hlavne-zruste-ta-viza-0h6-/ln_noviny.asp?c=A081210_000044_ln_noviny_sko&klic=228990&mes=081210_0

against deeper political integration. Second, the Czech parties do not have strong opinions about these issues, which means that they often mechanically adopt arguments from their sister parties in the EU. Third, if the costs of the Turkish membership become more visible (for instance, the shift of the Czech Republic from being a member of the group of net recipients of EU funds to being a net payer), the resistance both within the society and in the parties may increase. The uncertain political situation coupled with the low relevance of Turkey for Czech foreign policy may bring a substantial change at any time.