

Denmark and Turkey's EU Accession: Between therapy and rejection

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After the constitutional referendum on September 12, 2010, the public debate about Turkey's EU accession has gotten new momentum. The essay is looking at some of the particular patterns that have previously characterized this debate in Denmark. It briefly analyzes the positions of Denmark's political and economic establishments, as well as, the broader public debate. The analysis shows that, so far, the Danish debate on Turkey's EU membership aspirations has been characterized by rhetoric of both "therapy" and "rejection".

The EU will always find an excuse!" So was the reaction of the barber Hüseyin Özkan in Copenhagen on the critical remarks with which Mogens Lykketoft, a leading member of Denmark's Social Democrats and previous minister of foreign affairs, warned against Turkey's accession to the EU (*Politiken*, 10. Nov. 2002). In the fall of 2002, Lykketoft joined the choir of voices that vociferously argued against Turkish membership before the EU enlargement summit in Copenhagen and expressed what actually many of his Danish colleagues thought. This negative attitude toward Turkish membership was in striking contradiction to the overwhelming support which the EU enlargement process in general enjoyed among Danish politicians. It was not enlargement as such, but the accession of Turkey against which Lykketoft came out. Apparently, Turkey's candidacy has a very peculiar status in Danish politics and it is knitted into both political discourses on the EU and the public debate about migration and Islam. In which ways is Turkey's EU accession perceived in Denmark? How is the political and economic elite framing this perception? Why does Denmark's desire for enlargement not comprise Turkey?

Since joining the European Community in 1972, a large part of the Danish population has retained its skeptical stance toward an ever closer union. This ingrained political skepticism is perfectly demonstrated by the four EU opt-outs: Copenhagen does not participate in common defense policies, in the economic and monetary union, in juridical cooperation besides the inter-governmental level, and it maintains a unilateral declaration on EU citizenship. These opt-outs address core issues of the traditionally perceived sovereignty of the national state and reflect deep concerns among large parts of Danish citizens. However, this does not mean that Danes do not really want to be a part of the EU. There are also strong concerns to lose touch with core EU developments. Danish EU skepticism is accompanied by anxieties to become isolated and a sincere desire for enhanced economic cooperation. Hence, the Danish attitude toward European integration is ambivalent and the mood of the population tends to shift with respect to questions of economic versus political integration. Danish EU policies are conducted within this context of ambivalent attitudes to the EU project and it is important for the political elite not to give the impression to make any major EU policy decisions without consulting the people. This applies also to the issue of Turkey's EU membership.

Looking at the political parties, a clear majority of Danish parties expresses lukewarm support for Turkey's EU membership based on the strict conditionality of the Copenhagen Criteria. Thereby, most parties view Turkey's EU accession in a one-dimensional way: it is Turkey as an applicant who wants to join a beneficial club and Brussels should carefully ensure the country's fulfillment of European standards before joining the EU. Only *Det Radikale Venstre* discusses Turkish membership in its official statements as possibly beneficial for both the applicant and the EU. In the eyes of Denmark's political establishment, Turkey is an EU candidate with still questionable democratic credentials and a relatively feeble human rights record. This negative political image of the country is additionally framed within cultural stereotypes according to which Turkey with its predominantly Muslim population is imagined as a Middle Eastern rather than a European country.

This negative image of Turkey is not shared by Denmark's business elite. In official statements, Turkey is presented as a dynamic economy with a fast growing private sector and high potentials for the future. In 2004, *Dansk Industri* (DI) published a report *Tyrkiet på vej!* (Turkey on the way) which aimed at informing its members and the Danish public about the perspectives and opportunities associated with Turkey's EU accession. In his preface, the then director of DI, Hans Skov Christensen, called the question of Turkey's EU membership the second biggest issue after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the name of DI, he declared that without any doubt, Turkey, like the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, should be invited to join the EU. Denmark's business sector often calls Turkey a "tiger economy" and puts its emphasis on integration. Not a cultural gap, but an increasing economic integration into the European market characterizes the perceptions of Turkey in business circles. From an economic perspective, Turkey is in particular a promising and still underdeveloped market for Danish entrepreneurs.

Moving to the broader public debate it becomes apparent that many politicians position themselves more critically vis-à-vis Turkey than it is expressed by their officially documented party lines. In general, this debate is characterized by the assumption that Turkey is not really able to live up to the Copenhagen Criteria. Danish observers apply the standards of the Scandinavian role model, and their critical stance toward Turkey is in line with the general suspicion that European integration causes a threat to the democratic credentials of this model. In this way, the contemporary debate on Turkish EU membership is still characterized by the perceptions that made Denmark itself a reluctant EU

member. This is particularly apparent with regard to two political issues in which Turkey played a central role: the EU's decision to partly stop the accession negotiations with Turkey because of Ankara's non-compromising attitude toward Cyprus, and the question of freedom of speech that was raised, for instance, under the Muhammad cartoon crisis which shook Denmark in 2005/2006.

In December 2006, Turkey's refusal to open its ports and airports to traffic from Cyprus led to the suspension of negotiation talks between Brussels and Ankara in eight out of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. In this quarrel between Turkey and the EU, the Danish Prime Minister first joined the camp of the EU hardliners (Cyprus, Greece, France and Austria) who called for a stop of the accession negotiations. Before the Luxembourg summit, Anders Fogh Rasmussen (*Venstre*) said that he wants to keep Turkey on the European track, however, only in giving Ankara a clear and ultimate signal; and the Danish Prime Minister added: "It is Turkey that has to adjust itself to the EU and not the other way round"! (*Politiken*, 29. November 2006). In a similar way, the leader of the Social Democrats, Helle Thorning-Schmidt reacted to the Cyprus crisis. In joining sides with the Prime Minister, she supported the idea of France and Germany to give Turkey an ultimatum of 18 months to sort out its problems with Cyprus. Also Thorning-Schmidt emphasized that it is in Europe's own interest to work together with Turkey, but the EU's rules apply to all and there is no room for Ankara to make its own rules (*Politiken*, 5. December 2006).

Apparently, Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Helle Thorning-Schmidt felt the pressure of public opinion. Even more important, they had to react to *Dansk Folkeparti's* suggestion to stop the accession negotiations with Turkey entirely and to give up the idea of Turkish membership in the EU. The then DF speaker on EU politics, Morten Messerschmidt, interpreted the discussion to stop the negotiations because of the Cyprus conflict as a first step toward the understanding that Turkey will never be able to live up to European standards (*Politiken*, 29. November 2006). Only Henriette Søtoft, head of the section for European affairs at *Dansk Industri*, criticized this emphasis on the Cyprus conflict in the public debate. In her opinion this discussion completely overshadowed the ongoing process of positive reforms which has nevertheless been taking place in Turkey (Børsen 13 December 2006). Eventually, the Danish government supported the suggestion of the EU Commission to stop the negotiations only with regard to eight chapters of the *acquis* and to continue the rest of the accession process.

In September 2005, the Danish daily *Jyllandsposten* published a series of cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad. What most probably was meant to be a provocation of Danish Muslims soon turned into a political crisis with a global dimension. One factor which triggered the internationalization of the cartoon crisis was the decision of Prime Minister Rasmussen in fall 2005 to reject the request of 11 ambassadors from Muslim states – Turkey among them – to meet with him and to discuss the issue. In the eyes of the then Danish Prime Minister, this meeting would have been a violation of the principle of freedom of speech. The fact that the Turkish ambassador participated in this request let Prime Minister Rasmussen to give a stern warning to Ankara. In his understanding Turkey joined the wrong side in this controversy. Aspiring full-membership in the EU means to fully accept the principle of freedom of speech. Rasmussen continued that if the Turkish ambassador's protest expresses Ankara's attitude toward this fundamental principle, then Turkey would risk a straight "no" to its EU membership-bid (*Berlingske*, 25. October 2005).

Generally speaking, Danish public opinion reacts extremely sensitive to any restrictions of civil liberties. Therefore, incidents such as the Muhammad cartoon crisis, Ankara's demand to close down the Kurdish TV-station *Roj TV* that is broadcasting from Denmark, or the trial against the literature Nobel Prize award winner Orhan Pamuk figure prominently in the public debate. To be sure, these cases clearly show that Turkey indeed has problems to comply with the political standards of the Copenhagen Criteria. However, the continuing focus on these democratic deficits by politicians and public opinion-makers emphasizes the shortcomings in Turkey's reform process at the expense of its many achievements.

While the Danish government maintains Turkey's formal right to be considered a candidate for full-membership in the EU, in the public debate some of its leading representatives give the impression that they neither believe nor want to believe in Ankara's ability to meet the Copenhagen Criteria. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that public support for Turkish membership is low and that the demand of *Dansk Folkeparti* to hold a referendum on Turkey's accession – although rejected by leading politicians of all other parties – finds resonance not only among the voters of DF.

Summing up, the country's public debate is stuck in a circular discourse about Turkey's ability to democratize. While supporters approach this question in a "therapeutic way" – "We have to help them and to treat their democratic

deficits, otherwise they will never be able to enjoy living in a democratic society with a functioning market economy" – opponents often base their arguments to reject Turkish membership on religious and cultural grounds. To a certain extent, the arguments of both sides seem to be rooted in the Danish self-confidence of representing a superior role-model of the democratic welfare-state. The debate, therefore, partly reflects previous discussions about Denmark's membership in the European Community. Under the political hegemony of the Social Democrats, the European Community was viewed as a conservative power: too Catholic, too capitalist, and dominated by Christian Democrats. However, while in the 1960s the question was whether Denmark has to sacrifice its democratic achievements in joining the European Community, today it is Turkey's possible accession that allegedly threatens the democratic and social achievements of the EU.

Looking at the major stake holders in the public debate about Turkey, only Denmark's business community and politicians associated with the security community break with this circular discourse and also point to the possible benefits which the EU could achieve by Turkey's EU membership. Generally speaking, the Danish debate moves within the formal framework given by Brussels, but it puts its focus almost entirely on the democratic deficits of the country and the reluctance of its political elite to live up to the norms of liberal democracy. On closer examination, the observer can detect a certain mismatch between the official statements of Denmark's political elite and the way in which many Danish politicians argue in the public debate. This mismatch might be behind the barber Hüseyin Özan's comment on Lykketoft that in the end the politicians will find an excuse for not granting Turkey full membership. Although Denmark's political establishment continues to reject the idea to hold a referendum on Turkish membership, eventually such a referendum could precisely be the excuse Hüseyin Özan meant; an excuse which even could be given in the name of popular democracy.