



CDI

## Notícias de Imprensa

Título: The impossibility of saying no

Data: 18/09/2004

NºDoc.: 259505

Pág.: 32 - 34

## The impossibility of saying no

ANKARA AND ISTANBUL

**Many European governments dislike the idea of Turkey joining the European Union—but they are still likely to agree in December to open membership talks**

**T**HIS is a tale of two countries that want to join the European Union. The first has been a stalwart member of NATO for over 50 years. It has a flourishing democracy, a lively free press and a stable government with a big parliamentary majority. Although most of its people are deeply religious, it is fiercely secular. Its economy is booming: over the past two years, GDP has grown by an annual average of 8.4%, and inflation has fallen by three-quarters, close to single figures. Unlike the current EU, it has a young and growing population. Its biggest city was a cradle of Christian (and European) civilisation. It sounds, in short, like a shoo-in for the EU.

The second country is quite different. It lies mostly in Asia, and it borders such troublesome places as Iraq, Syria and Iran. Its economy has been a basket-case for decades, its currency has been repeatedly devalued, many of its banks are ailing and it is one of the largest debtors to the IMF. It is far poorer than even the poorest of the ten countries that joined the EU in May. It has a history of military coups. Its dreadful human-rights record and its torture of prisoners are well documented. Its people are overwhelmingly Muslim, and it could soon be the EU's biggest member by population. In short, the EU should not touch it with a bargepole.

The question of which country the EU should admit is, of course, a trick one. For these are not two countries, but one: Turkey. This year the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has become a familiar figure round Europe, pressing the case for starting membership talks. Now the moment of truth is at hand. In two weeks' time, the European Commission will publish its verdict on Turkey's readiness. And in December EU leaders must decide whether to say yes, and fix a date next year for the start of negotiations.

That it is possible, in our tale of two countries, to depict Turkey in such diametrically opposed ways shows why it presents such a poser for the EU. No other country's putative membership arouses such passions. It was a big issue in last June's European elections. This month, fresh controversy has broken out over a Turkish government proposal to criminalise adultery, which was hastily dropped after an outcry around Europe.

Several European commissioners have spoken out against Turkey's aspirations. Franz Fischler, the (Austrian) agriculture commissioner, has said that Turkey is more oriental than European. Frits Bolkestein, the (Dutch) single-market commissioner, declared that Turkish entry would mean that 1683 (when Turkish troops were

thrown back from the gates of Vienna) would have been in vain. And Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a former French president, has said that Turkish entry would mean the end of Europe.

The question of Turkish membership of the European club has been around for four decades. Turkey was the second country to sign a European association agreement, normally seen as a prelude to membership, as long ago as 1963. It formally applied for membership only in 1987. The European Commission recommended against that application in 1989, but it remained on the table. Throughout the 1990s, even as they prepared to take in the eight central European countries that joined in May, European leaders trod gingerly around Turkey's hopes, though in 1996 an EU-Turkey customs union was formed. In 1997 an EU summit pointedly left the country off its list of candidates.

This evasiveness irritated the Turks. Turkish politicians continued to insist on the country's European vocation. Turkish generals began to mutter that they might have done better in Brussels had they spent 40 years in the Warsaw Pact, not NATO. Yet the truth is that Turkey's instability in the 1990s, culminating in the "soft coup" that ousted a mildly Islamist party from government in 1997, made talk of EU membership moot. So did its succession of economic crises, leading to near-default and an IMF bail-out in 2001. Turkey's brutal war on Kurdish PKK terrorists in the south-east, and its repeated human-rights violations, also disqualified it.

It was not until 1999 that an EU summit in Helsinki formally accepted Turkey as a candidate. In 2002 EU leaders went further, declaring that if, in December 2004, ►►

**CDI**

**Notícias de Imprensa**

Título: The impossibility of saying no

Data: 18/09/2004

NºDoc.: 259505

Pág.: Cont.

