

INTERVIEW WITH ERIC ROULEAU*

This interview was conducted by Jean Catsiapis.

TURKEY HAS BEEN GIVEN ITS CHANCE TO ENTER THE EUROPEAN UNION**

In this interview, Eric Rouleau supports the idea that the Turks have been oriented towards Europe since the nineteenth century and the Ottoman Empire did extend over a large part of the continent so that the Turks were part of Europe. The pro-European sentiment was reinforced by reformist sultans and the “Union and Progress” organisation, dominant until WWI. Later Kemal Atatürk worked to Westernize (read modernize) the Turkish nation. In 1963, Turkey signed a trade association agreement with the European Common Market¹. As a result, the Turks favour the EU for many convergent reasons. For example, the Kurds support Turkey’s membership bid because it will guarantee fundamental freedoms. Paradoxically, members of the Islamic movement have shared this position only recently. They think that a Western-style democracy will ensure their future survival.

Erbakan², the Islamist leader, claimed to favour a secular society along the French model; i.e., a neutral state on religious matters. Both Islamist fundamentalists and Kurds³ find their situation precarious. Fundamentalists recall the December 1995 elections in which the Islamic party REFAH won only to be outlawed two years later.

For economic reasons, the business community is pro-Europe. Over half Turkey’s trade is with Europe. Overall, the population and political class think EU membership is necessary.

Europeans, however, have long considered Turkey politically and economically immature as a member or even candidate. Turkish political parties claimed Turkey was rejected because the EU did not want Muslims included. Of course a a faction of the German Christian

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** This is a long summary of the interview given in french.

Democrat party and the extreme European right opposed the membership of a Muslim country. Nevertheless Turkish politicians camouflaged the real reasons behind EU opposition to Turkey because they knew Brussel's conditions for Turkey's entry would upset the country's political system.

After Kemal Ataturk's death, Turkish leaders created this state dogma, a kind of ideology named kemalism, which all Turks should adopt and that limits individual freedoms. The Turkish constitution lists contrary political opinions as a crime against the state. Hence the stumbling block is the Turkish constitution drafted by a military government in 1980.

On the other hand there is a negative bias stemming from historical and literary stereotypes of 'the bad Ottoman'. There was also the good reputation of Ataturk's Turkey, but overall modern Turkey appears almost dictatorial without regard for human rights. Alan Parker's film of 20 some years ago, *Midnight Express*, had a greater impact than it should have had. More recently the Kurdish issue has damaged Turkey's image.

Turkey frightens some European governments because its unemployment and economic figures will cost Europe a lot -- a complaint heard about the Greek economy despite its better health. Also some Europeans consider Turkey a fifth column for the USA.

However, governments do change, as it was the case in Germany and in Greece, and it is on this basis that the Turkish candidacy is now maintained.

Referring to the Cyprus problem and to the country's possible membership to the EU, Rouleau agrees to the official French position which doesn't favour Cypriot membership until the Cyprus issue is settled. Greek Cypriots are dreaming, according to Rouleau, if they believe they can adhere to EU despite internal conflict. The EU does not link Cypriot and Turkish membership. If Greek Cypriots wish to be accepted in the EU, they should accept the *fait accompli*. Thus Cyprus would become a united or federal state and then surely the

Turkish Cypriots would quickly approach the Greek Cypriots because the separatists, like Mr. Denktash⁴, have little future. All Cypriots would benefit in the end.

If a solution has not been found for the Cyprus question since 1974, it is due to the fact that the Turkish military establishment considers Cyprus as a strategic position for the defense of Turkey. Rouleau disagrees with this position but he notices that the Turkish military uses the Cyprus question, the struggle against the Kurds and Islamist fundamentalists as well as the so-called ambitions of Greece to justify its political power.

Concerning the amelioration of Greco-Turkish relations and the “Earthquake Diplomacy”⁵, the former French ambassador in Turkey says that any sustainable improvement depends on the internal situation in Turkey. The military’s priority is the internal situation in Turkey. If internal politics dictates it, relations with Greece will shift back.

Furthermore, Rouleau supports the idea that there is a monolithic structure in the army’s chain of command. Purges have removed officers with non-Kemalist opinions. Yet inside the military two opinions on EU membership tactics are converging. According to the first opinion, held by the most intransigent officers, Turkey must renounce to EU membership because it would force the country into a prejudicial situation. The other opinion, held by more flexible officers, wants EU membership so that Turkey can participate in the European defense system. Nevertheless, the EU should take Turkish particularities into account within a compromise. They believe that Turkey can negotiate membership criteria because the Europeans need the Turks for geopolitical and economic strategic reasons. In other words, the EU will make concessions to Ankara. This position resembles that of the USA, according to which Europe may need an ally in the Balkans, Caucasian steppes or Middle East. Hence Turkey cannot be excluded from the EU on political or ethical grounds.

So at the end one can suggest that the military establishment wants “à la carte” membership to EU and a two-tiered Europe with room for

a compromise. Turkey could thus join while refusing certain rules. However, Rouleau concludes, the Turkish military are wrong. If Great Britain does not join the EMU, it still obeys the basic principles shared by all Europeans. The EU could not admit a country whose institutions are contrary to European values.

NOTES

1. The treaty signed in Ankara on 12 September 1963 by the Association of Turkey with the ECC foresaw this country's membership.
2. Necmettin Erbakan, chief of the party called Refah, an Islamic formation which received 21.32% of the votes in the December 24, 1995 elections. He became prime minister on July 8, 1996 but under pressure from the army he resigned on June 18, 1998. On January 16, 1998, the constitutional court decided to dissolve the Refah party for non-secular activities.
3. The number of Kurds in Turkey ranges from 10 to 15 million, the overall population of the country is 63 million.
4. Rauf Denktash is the President of the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" which is recognized diplomatically by Turkey alone.
5. The rapprochement between Greece and Turkey started with the meeting, in July 1st, 1999, of their ministers of External Affairs, G. Papandreou and İsmail Cem. It was pronounced more with the earthquake in Turkey (August 17th) and in Athens (September 7th).