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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Slovenia

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Traditionally strong political support for Turkey's EU membership

Slovenia's official policy regarding Turkey's accession to the EU has generally been supportive, under the condition that Turkey meets the same requirements as any other candidate country. At the same time, Turkey's EU membership has not really been a major political issue that would for example be raised during election campaigns.

The major reason for the Slovene position is its principal support for the enlargement. As a small country that newly gained independence in 1991, Slovenia had strived for EU membership, which was seen as a way of improving possibilities for political and economic development. Following its own accession in 2004, EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans was a strategic priority for Slovenia since it would bring stability and progress to the neighbouring region that was scattered by the conflicts following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Due to Turkey's geopolitical location, growing economy and political role in the region, its accession was therefore also seen as a specific opportunity for Slovenia.

In the last years, there has not been a significant change in Slovenia's position. The new centre-right government that took power in 2004 continued to support Turkey's accession, though some scepticism in tone was noted, mostly reflecting the changing attitudes in the rest of the EU. The economic and financial crisis and the crisis in the Eurozone, which hit Slovenia hard, led to a dusting off the ties with fast-growing emerging economies such as Turkey, resulting in the bilateral strategic partnership agreement of 2011. While the euro crisis brought lower support for enlargement and for the EU in general, support for Turkey's EU membership actually increased in Slovenia from 47 percent in 2005 to 53 percent in 2013.

1.2. The geopolitical "big picture" reasoning dominated the debates

Interest-based arguments regarding the strategic and security implications of Turkey's accession for Slovenia as a small country have been dominating the debate. The "big picture" reasoning has been the most common: Turkey's accession has been seen as a strategic advantage due to its geopolitical location, military strength and strong role in NATO, as well as the size and prospects of its economy. Through these attributes, Turkey was considered to strengthen the EU.

From a purely economic perspective, Turkey's membership has been depicted as beneficial since it represents a market for outwards investments, contributing to the internationalization of Slovenian firms in the context of growing trade between South-East and North-West Europe. There would, however, also be a negative side to Turkey's full integration since it would put

¹ The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

competitive pressure on individual sectors such as agriculture, and also lead to a redistribution of structural funds from the EU.

Value-based narratives have also been present in the debate among the elites as well as in the media and public debate. The accession process has been seen as a way of promoting liberal democracy and human rights in accession countries. Turkish accession was also seen as a cultural enrichment in the sense of a dialogue of cultures and “Western” and “Oriental” civilization. More critical issues of human rights violations, Armenian genocide and culture of coup d’état, have also been raised – as well as identity-based arguments stressing the Catholic/Christian roots of Europe and the “borders of Europe”. These identity and culture-related issues were, however, framed as something that would not specifically affect Slovenia but were rather open questions to be addressed by the EU as a whole.

From an identity point of view, enlargement has largely been seen as a way of “becoming Europeans”. However, some researchers have pointed out the “historical” image of Turks as a threatening and violent factor that had been present in Slovene arts and literature since the Middle Age. Generally, one can identify prejudices against the Muslim population in parts of society, which potentially also influence their stance towards Turkish EU membership. For example, plans to build a mosque in Ljubljana in the late 2000s triggered some opposition by right-wing political forces and public opinion. In this context, one should however note that most Muslims in Slovenia are not related with Turks but stem from ex-Yugoslav countries.

1.3. Geostrategic and business opportunities as the main policy areas

The main policy areas discussed in relation to Turkey’s accession to EU in Slovenia have been related to geopolitics, security and Turkey’s strategic position in the region. Turkey’s accession has been considered a factor contributing to peace, democratization and development in the broader region. More recently, the role of Turkey in curbing the migration influx into Europe has emerged on the agenda.

In economic terms, Turkey’s accession has also been considered as a business opportunity in terms of trade, internationalization of individual industrial sectors, and growth of maritime traffic (meaning the prospect of strengthening the position of the Slovenian port Luka Koper). Through Turkey, Slovenian firms could reach markets in Central Asia and Middle East. Slovenia and Turkey have also thought of each other as potential markets for the expansion of tourism. Slovenia’s recent foreign policy strategy of 2015 therefore identifies Turkey as one of the three priority markets (besides the USA and Japan). From the perspective of EU policy making, EU-funded projects for Turkish infrastructure via public tenders could be another big business opportunity for Slovene firms. In addition to that, Turkey would redistribute powers in the EU, balancing the influence of the old member states in the decision-making process.

The state of the liberal and democratic institutions and human rights in Turkey has been an issue from the perspective of political conditionality of membership. The rights of the ethnic Kurds

living in Turkey and the Cyprus issue have also been discussed. These were, however, not considered as obstacles specifically relevant for Slovenia but rather as problems that would need to be addressed from the viewpoint of the EU as a whole.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Closing the door towards Turkey would mean giving up the strongest means of influence

Generally, the political elites keep their position to maintain support for Turkey's accession perspective. The key concern is that if the door is closed, i.e. if Turkey is denied the opportunity of becoming an EU member state, the EU will deprive itself of the most important policy means it has to influence the future development of Turkey and also of the broader region. In that case, Turkey could slide further into authoritarianism and would probably seek for alternative strategic partners. There is a high chance that instability in the region would grow if Turkey turns away completely from the EU and vice versa.

For Slovenia, the potential implications and spill-overs to the strategically important Western Balkans are of particular concern since Turkey is an important geostrategic player in this region. There are also concerns regarding the implications of such a closed-door policy for economic and business projects of strategic importance.

More recently, the focus has been on the migrant and refugee crisis which has directly affected Slovenia as one of the main entry points to the Schengen area and which has heated the tensions between the countries in the Western Balkans.

It is hard to identify specific views of political parties and groups on this matter with almost no political debate existing. This might suggest that the positions, largely influenced by geopolitical and business-related considerations, do not differ much. Interestingly, this also applies to the populist right wing Slovene National Party, which was the only of its kind in the EU to support Turkey's accession. What is more, one of its members actually presided the inter-parliamentary group of Turkish-Slovene friendship. More negative attitudes of related political parties in the other EU member states could result in more negative views by individual political parties in Slovenia.

The debate is mostly framed by the government officials, businessmen and a few experts. The civil society has been a bystander in the process. This includes the Catholic Church, an influential actor in Slovenia, which has also been quiet on the issue. Both the media and the general public play a rather passive role. Overall, public opinion has nevertheless typically been more in favour than against Turkey's EU membership.

The recent tensions between Turkey and the EU and the growing authoritarianism of Turkish political elites however fortify deeply rooted negative views of Turks by some parts of the

society. Some question cooperation with Turkey, though there is still no direct confrontation on this in the mainstream discourse dominated by political and economic elites.

2.2. Call it whatever you want – just keep the door open

As explained above, Slovenia supports Turkey's accession to the EU, under the condition that all the requirements of the accession process and the Copenhagen Criteria are met – the same as for all the other candidate countries. What is more, the "specific importance" of Turkey for the EU (from the Slovenian perspective) even implies that Slovenia believes that the EU should be more understanding towards the situation in Turkey.

As a strong supporter of Turkey's EU accession, Slovenia would not officially argue for a differentiated approach towards integration – although political elites are well aware that in practice this kind of cooperation has already been taking place for some time. The open rejection of the opportunity of becoming a full EU member – no matter how soon this could take place or how realistic it is from the present point of view – could nevertheless have strong negative effects.

As long as the door is, at least in principle, kept open, Slovenia would therefore support any kind of closer relationship, no matter how it would be called. In fact, Slovenia itself has already engaged in a special relationship with Turkey, formalized by the bilateral strategic partnership agreement of 2011. Removing the opportunity of acquiring full member status would, however, give these kinds of arrangements a different role since they would no longer be seen as complementary to full EU membership.

2.3. The challenge of the European migrant and refugee crisis

By far the most significant event that affected the most recent debate on EU-Turkey relations in Slovenia was the migrant and refugee crisis of 2015. In summer 2015, the Western Balkans route became the main path of entry to the EU and when Hungary closed its border with a fence in October, the migrant influx was redirected to Slovenia. Being a small country, the migrant inflow of almost 580 000 people represented a major challenge for Slovenia. Increasingly negative attitudes towards migrants in the EU and threats by other member states to close the border further north created fears in Slovenia of becoming a "migrant pocket".

As a result, the Slovenian government supported a closing down of the Western Balkans route, but a broader agreement between the EU and Turkey was needed for that. On the other hand, Turkish political elites used the situation to push forward their demand for a visa liberalization policy. In the EU, this raised opposition towards Turkey's EU membership. In the media, Turkey now assumed the role of a country run by undemocratic elites that is taking advantage of the position of being the only barrier standing between the EU and the flood of migrants in order to extort concessions from European governments. This image, bringing from the subconscious the images of the attacks of Turks on Europe in the Middle Ages, affected not only the perception of Turkey but also of the migrant and refugee crisis. It went from being considered as a

humanitarian question to being considered a “weapon of mass migrations” used by Turkey, pushing the relationship further in the waters of securitization, nationalism and xenophobia. For the Slovene government, which was in desperate need of an effective deal on migrations between the EU and Turkey, this was a problem. In order to continue with the good relationship with Turkey, the government avoided commenting on the issue and focused more on the need to close down the Western Balkans route.

The second major event influencing the perception of the EU-Turkey relationship were the reports of mass violations of human rights following the failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, which affected negatively the perception of the Turkish political regime. Once again, the Slovene government was relatively quiet on the issue. Bilateral high-level visits and plans of further economic cooperation were engaged soon after, in order to not to distract from business as usual. The Slovenian president was actually the first high representative of an EU member state to visit the Turkey after the failed coup.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

3.1. The ‘Kurdish question’ and Turkey’s Middle Eastern politics raised criticism

Turkey’s role in the crisis in Syria was a factor that influenced the perception of Turkey in Slovenia negatively. A part of the “hybrid war” between global players was also a media war through which Russians were placing information, which also had a certain effect in the Slovene press coverage. For example, Turkish elites were accused of having supported the Islamic state, e.g. by trading with its oil. As another example, according to information published by the Russian-influenced media, a substantial number of supporters of the Turkish regime, which has for some time been erasing the line between a secular state and Islam, were allegedly sympathizing with the idea of a Pan-Arab Islamic caliphate, stretching into Europe.

After the failed coup in Turkey, and possibly also as a result of the European criticism regarding the purges after the coup, Turkey changed its foreign policy, now seeking for a stronger partnership with Moscow. Furthermore, a number of EU member states, including Slovenia, have been strengthening their support for the Kurdish fighters in Syria, which has triggered criticism from the Turkish side. The Turkish government’s pursuit of its particular geopolitical interests as well as the fact that it exploited the mass migration flow to put pressure on Europe resulted in a further antagonized image of Turkey in the eyes of the European and also of the Slovene public.

3.2. Seeking a joint approach on Western Balkans

The most prosperous area of cooperation for Slovenia and Turkey in their neighbourhoods is a joint *quid-pro-quo* approach in helping each other to gain access to third countries’ markets.

While Turkey could help Slovenian firms to further expand their businesses in the Middle East and North Africa, Slovenia could help Turkey to gain access to the ex-Soviet space and Western Balkans markets. To give an example of an already existing cooperation in this area, Turkey and Slovenia recently cooperated in a project of constructing a hydroelectric power plant on the river Morača in Montenegro.

From a geostrategic perspective, the Western Balkans are of vital importance for Slovenia. The Turkish presence and influence on the Western Balkans is growing, specifically in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, in order to provide for stability and development in the region, cooperation with Turkey is needed. Cooperation with neighbouring countries is also needed regarding the management of migration, not least from the perspective of its influence on Slovenia and the Western Balkans. When it comes to these issues, Slovenia is, however, a marginal actor, more or less depending on the larger players in the EU.

3.3. What will become of the Community Turkey once wanted to be a part of?

The global economic power transition from the West towards the East makes cooperation with Turkey, which is somehow halfway between both, of key importance. Turkey is itself one of the most vibrant fast-growing emerging economies that not only went through the global financial and economic crisis without a scratch but even managed to strengthen its position.

Growing political instability in the world and in the EU are also changing the debate on Turkey's accession to the EU in Slovenia. The EU is in the midst of a deep political crisis. For Slovenia, as a small state and an open economy, the survival of the European integration process and of the liberal democratic order in general is of primary importance. However, the weakening of the EU and the USA becoming a somehow less reliable partner are strengthening the importance of alliances with non-EU countries, especially when it comes to the neighbourhood policy. This explains the ambiguous attitude of the Slovenian political elites towards the recent developments in EU-Turkey relations. On the one hand, Slovenian political elites share worries of other EU member states with regard to the domestic political developments in Turkey. On the other hand, they believe that anti-Turkey sentiments should not be (ab)used by the EU political elites to regain political credibility. Thus, for example, the European Parliament's vote in November 2016 to temporarily freeze negotiations with Turkey was criticised by Slovenian political elites as being "short sighted".

Links & Further Readings:

- http://ankara.embassy.si/fileadmin/user_upload/dkp_16_van/docs/Partnerstvo-angl-slo-alt-print_02.doc
- http://oldweb.ikv.org.tr/images/upload/data/files/slovenian_media_reporting_on_turkey.pdf

- <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turkey-wants-money-visa-liberalization-in-exchange-for-deal-on-migrants-03-07-2016>
- http://www.vlada.si/en/media_room/newsletter/slovenia_weekly/news/article/slovenia_and_turkey_seek_closer_economic_cooperation_52260/
- http://www.vlada.si/en/media_room/newsletter/slovenia_weekly/news/article/pm_cer_ar_eu_turkey_summit_a_major_step_towards_the_more_effective_management_of_the_migration_crisis_57156/
- http://www2.mirovni-institut.si/eng_html/projects/Slo%20report%20revised.pdf
- <http://aranews.net/2016/02/slovenia-joins-war-on-isis-by-supporting-kurdish-troops/>