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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

The Netherlands

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. The Traditional Position: (conditional) support for Turkish EU membership

The Netherlands has traditionally supported Turkey's EU membership. But that support has never been unconditional. As elsewhere inside the EU there have always been doubts about the capacity of Turkey to adapt and of the EU to absorb. But the fact remains that the Dutch government, which held the presidency of the Council at the time, helped to pave the way for the opening of official negotiations in 2004. But of course, strings were attached: the Copenhagen Criteria would have to be met and in combination with the formula of the "open-ended process" it was clear that membership was not a guaranteed outcome. It was expected to be a long process during which Turkey could become a different, more European, country.

An important internal motive to follow this road was the presence of a large Turkish community in The Netherlands. In a way Turkey was already there, one argued. From a broader perspective, one of the main arguments for opening up to the country was the advantage of integrating a large Muslim country in a region of strategic importance to the EU. It would be an important positive signal to the Islamic world. There was a certain optimism that membership talks would help Turkey to become a more democratic country. It was hoped that with the new AK party government the remnants of the old autocratic regime would be removed – in particular as regarded the role of the armed forces – and that relations with the Kurdish minority would be improved. But there was also the more mundane fact that the Dutch as president of the EU was responsible for finding a compromise between the Member States – many of them not very enthusiastic – and the pressure from Ankara that after so many years in the waiting room now – after the 2004 EU enlargement – demanded the start of official negotiations.

1.2. The changed narrative: Euroscepticism and anti-Islam polemics

But a lot has changed since then. The dominant narrative about Turkey has become much more negative. First of all the "no" to the Constitutional Treaty in the national referendum of 2005 was interpreted partly as a protest against the 'big bang' enlargement of the EU in 2004 and against the prospective membership of Turkey. Politicians could not ignore this signal, became more critical of the enlargement process and began to doubt the wisdom of the official approach to Turkey.

This changing attitude also has to be seen against the background of increasing Euroscepticism and a growing anti-Islam mood due to the difficulties with the local integration of Moroccan and

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.

Turkish minorities. This caused tensions that fed an already strong undercurrent in Dutch society turning against traditional politics. What was seen by many ordinary citizens as the failure of the multicultural society, came to be exploited successfully first by the populist politician Pim Fortuijn, who was later murdered, and after him by the former liberal MP Geert Wilders and his Party of Freedom (PVV) that presently is again a frontrunner in many Dutch opinion polls. It was no real surprise that in this political climate some political parties totally turned against Turkey's membership of the EU; others increasingly questioned the process as such.

While also the Dutch in general reacted positively to the initial reform process started in Turkey after 2004, lately there has been disappointment regarding the attitude of the Turkish government and the obvious backsliding towards a more autocratic regime. Although the attempted coup of July 2016 was clearly condemned by The Hague, the steps taken afterwards by the Erdoğan regime have been labelled as disproportionate, to say the least. There is grave concern about the mass arrests, the on-going attacks on the free media, the escalation in South Eastern Turkey and the detention of HDP parliamentarians. Also the interference of Turkey in the Dutch Turkish community trying to turn it against the Gülen movement, has created bad blood. There is a growing distrust about the links between the Turkish government and local religious organisations. A number of Dutch Turks has reacted to this growing criticism of the present regime in Ankara by turning their backs on the parties they traditionally supported and expressing their sympathies for a more or less ethnic party founded by two MP's that left the Dutch Labour Party. Recently a row erupted between the Dutch and Turkish governments about the participation of the Turkish Foreign Minister in an event to be held in Rotterdam to promote the "yes" in the referendum on the Turkish constitution. This was labelled as an unwelcome intervention in Dutch society and its Turkish community. The Dutch government in the end denied this minister landing rights. Another Turkish minister who came by land from Germany to Rotterdam to give a speech there was sent back by the authorities. This started a diplomatic conflict that has not been solved yet. The Dutch have been accused by the Turkish government of "NAZI methods" and the Dutch ambassador has not been allowed to return to Turkey after a leave.

1.3. Main Policy concerns

The main policy areas that are being discussed in The Netherlands as being key to EU-Turkey relations are the accession process, the backsliding of democracy and the rule of law, the absorption capacity of the EU, the refugee crisis and Syria, the geopolitical context and the relations between the Turkish government and the large Turkish community in The Netherlands. There is growing scepticism regarding the relevance of the accession negotiations since Turkey is seen as heading in the wrong direction after the attempted coup. Would it not be time to look for other options? Questions remain regarding the capacity of a troubled EU to integrate a large Muslim country such as Turkey. Although the number of Syrian refugees has dropped

enormously as a consequence of the EU-Turkey refugee deal, there is still unease about the concessions made to the country regarding visa liberalisation and accession talks. While one of the main arguments to open the EU door to Turkey was and is the wish to embed it in Europe and its rules-based, value-driven approach to the world, Ankara has opted for a somewhat different approach, more in line with Russia's views of the world. The discussion about the dual and sometimes conflicting loyalty of Dutch citizens of Turkish origin continues.

2. Future of EU-Turkey relations

2.1. Critical of further EU enlargement

The decision of the European Commission not to further enlarge the EU during its mandate until 2019 was welcomed in The Hague. Some political parties even want a complete end of the process; others agree to delay its implementation. No one wants to add new names to the list of candidate countries. The fear that this would be the case for Ukraine moved many in The Netherlands to vote against the association treaty with Ukraine in the recent referendum. The Dutch government has demanded a public confirmation from the EU that association is not a step in the direction of EU membership as a condition for final ratification of the agreement. Since the plebiscite was of a consultative character, the "no" is not legally binding which gives the government room for interpretation – in this case signing after some concessions of the EU and Ukraine. The European Council of December 2016 agreed to a text which confirms that the Association Treaty cannot be interpreted as a step towards EU membership and does not contain military obligations. These were some of the main issues during the referendum campaign. The Dutch Second Chamber of Parliament approved this solution. Confirmation by the Senate is expected. The fact that the "no" of the referendum was interpreted this way hardly had any effect on the outcome of the 15th of March national elections. Although Croatia's accession was not actually contested, future ratifications will most likely be put to a referendum.

When analysing the current debate on Turkey in The Netherlands, one can observe a few main trends. One is a value-based approach criticising Turkey for its undemocratic behaviour but not giving up completely the perspective of EU membership. Proponents of this policy usually underline the importance of Turkey as a partner and the (economic) interests of the EU in the region. Some parties argue that Turkey is just too big to integrate in the EU. Its accession would complicate EU decision-making and it could have a very detrimental effect on employment conditions – the free movement of labour could cause a huge influx of Turkish workers accepting very low wages. There is also resistance against integrating such a large Muslim country. On religious grounds, but even more given the popularity of the anti-Islam party of Geert Wilders out of fear of loss of national identity. Wilders has taken a very tough line on Turkey labelling President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as an 'islamofascist'.

The official Dutch appreciation of the November 2016 European Commission report on the negotiations with Turkey was critical. In a letter to the Parliament the Foreign Minister reiterated that The Netherlands cannot accept that internal political divisions in Turkey are being exported to his country where they create tensions in Turkish communities. He warned more or less that the introduction of the death penalty in Turkey is a red line not to be crossed. On the sensitive topic of visa liberalisation, the minister underlined again that all the benchmarks would have to be fully met by Turkey.

Although the official position still does not exclude Turkey's membership of the EU, the political elite as a whole remains rather sceptical and the population, if given the choice in a national referendum, would certainly vote against it. The party platforms for the 2017 national elections are not very promising from a Turkish perspective. They range from leaving the EU altogether (Turkey problem solved), no Turkish membership at all, officially halting the negotiations to membership not now and only under very strict conditions. In the most recent State of the European Union published by the Dutch government in December 2016, enlargement is not an issue at all. Turkey is only mentioned in the part devoted to migration. The report states that we need Turkey to tackle that problem and the terrorist threat but that the country is a partner that has very different views about core rule of law issues.

While some parties want to halt the accession talks anyhow, others hope to use the negotiations the push the Turkish government in a different direction and at least want to protect the channels needed to cooperate with Ankara on the refugee issue and other regional challenges. But nobody expects a turnaround of President Erdoğan. The debate about the links to Turkey thus mainly finds place in the context of the EU. The fact that the country is full member of NATO hardly plays any role.

2.2. Alternative options for Turkey

There will be national elections in The Netherlands on the 15th of March 2017. One should not be surprised that their outcome will lead to a political constellation in which a different government would put the end of accession negotiations high on the agenda. This would of course also bring about a debate on alternatives such as a privileged partnership. The Dutch might be keen to further develop this concept since it could also be used for other EU neighbouring countries such as Ukraine for which accession seems definitively blocked after the "no" to the association treaty in the recent Dutch referendum. This would mean exchanging the option of integration for intense cooperation. Since the interest in Turkish integration is waning and EU accession disappearing beyond the immediate time horizon, expanding the customs union is seen as a short-term alternative to maintain some positive dynamics in the cooperation with Turkey.

2.3. Disappointment with the political change

Under pressure from the national public debate and the Dutch parliament, the Foreign Minister has lately tried to convince his EU colleagues to block certain EU funds out of protest against anti-democratic steps of the Turkish government and also proposed to temporarily freeze the accession negotiations. He found insufficient support for that in the Council of Ministers because a majority of EU countries do not want to further complicate relations with Turkey right now also with the EU-Turkey refugee deal and the situation concerning Syria in mind. They were only willing to put a sentence in the conclusions of the December 2016 General Affairs Council saying that in fact no new negotiating chapters had been opened since the 30th of June and that there were no plans to do so under the present circumstances. This weaker formula was however blocked by Austria that demanded a more radical decision - the formal halt of the membership talks with Turkey. As a consequence there were no formal Council conclusions on the Commission enlargement package – only a Slovak presidency statement.

The agreement on refugees, although heavily promoted by the Dutch governing coalition, was met with some scepticism by the opposition in the Dutch Second Chamber of Parliament. There was major criticism of the promises made to Turkey regarding visa liberalisation and the intensification of the accession negotiations. Nevertheless, The Netherlands has a huge interest in the successful outcome of the deal since the now stopped influx of Syrian war refugees created a lot of practical and political problems in 2015. This is one of the reasons why the Dutch will certainly not go so far as demand a complete break in the accession process.

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

3.1. No to the association treaty with Ukraine

The outcome of the 2016 Ukraine referendum – no to the association treaty – certainly limits the Dutch ambitions regarding the EU's neighbourhood, both the East and South. The Dutch attitude towards these countries, including Turkey, will remain to be determined more by immediate concerns regarding human rights violations, Islam and identity, the refugee threat and the protection of labour markets rather than long-term strategic considerations.

The debate about possible disadvantageous geopolitical shifts in the immediate neighbourhood, including Turkey, does not have much impact. Relations with these countries are seen through domestic glasses with an emphasis on short-term interests and immediate threats. Geopolitical arguments about the role of Russia in the periphery did not impress the majority of Dutch voters who said “no” against the association treaty with Ukraine. They were led by the possible negative consequences for The Netherlands of an eventual Ukrainian membership and not to be convinced by the positive impact of closer relations with the EU on Ukraine. It is the same with Turkey.

3.2. Maintaining and promoting stability in the common neighbourhood

Even though relations between the EU in general, and The Netherlands in particular, and Turkey have deteriorated with also Ankara setting a negative tone, the two sides have an interest in maintaining and promoting stability in the common neighbourhood. This includes the Black Sea area but more importantly parts of the MENA region. If relations were to improve, further action to tackle the causes of unwanted migration and Jihadism could be envisaged in these areas. Energy security and economic development are also areas of potential cooperation.

3.3. The global level: Russia and Syria

For the moment, the *rapprochement* between Moscow and Ankara is not used as an argument to be friendlier towards Turkey. There is an awareness of the danger posed by an eventual triangular coalition of Trump, Putin and Erdoğan, but how to react to that remains an open question.

The civil war in Syria and its consequences have certainly had an impact on the Dutch view of Turkey. The Netherlands support the anti-Assad coalition and there is and was sympathy for the Turkish efforts in providing support to millions of Syrian refugees. There is great relief that the flow of war victims to Europe has been halted due to the deal with Ankara.

Links & Further Readings:

- European Council (2016): “Outcome of the Council meeting”, 3511th Council meeting General Affairs, 15536/16 (OR. en), December 13th 2016, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/12/st15536_en16_pdf/
- Vergaderjaar 2016–2017, 23 987, Lidmaatschap van de Europese Unie, 28 November 2016
- Vergaderjaar 2016–2017, 34 648, Staat van de Europese Unie 2017, 23 December 2016
- Wiersma, J.M. (2013): “Limits to the enlargement of the European Union”, in Schout, A.; Rood, J. (eds): *The Netherlands as an EU Member: Awkward or Loyal Partner?*, The Hague 2013, p.163-177