



ESI report: Austrian opposition to Turkey stems from ignorance

Turkish Daily News

February 4, 2008

According to a new report by the European Stability Initiative (ESI), until 2002 there was little distinction between Austrian views toward Turkey and any other European Union candidate, however the main reason for Austria's growing concern about Turkey is ignorance. "A referendum on the Unknown Turk" published on Jan. 30, aims to elucidate the notable Austrian opposition to enlargement in general and Turkey in particular.

The current public mood discouraging Turkey's membership does not have its roots in the distant past, but rather it is a reflection of the recent behavior of the Austrian political elite, says the report by ESI, a Berlin-based research and policy group that advocates the EU's expansion throughout the western Balkans.

The report also says that until spring 2004, the positions of both major parties toward Turkey remained open. However, when the Democrats, currently in the opposition, attacked the ruling Austrian People's Party (OVP) for 'going soft' on Turkey by failing to block the opening of accession talks, leading the OVP chancellor to promise a referendum in December 2004, any consensus on discussing the pros and cons for Austria of each individual enlargement decision was destroyed. As a result, a new cross-party consensus emerged in favor of deferring any serious debate to an eventual referendum, the report says. Moreover, since then Austrian politicians have made little effort to explain their position on Turkey to the public, and Austrian institutions have produced little serious research about contemporary Turkey.

The report revealed that according to the latest European Commission-sponsored Eurobarometer survey in late 2006 addressing the question of accession of individual countries, support for Turkish accession had fallen to a mere 5 percent, while for example 24 percent of Greeks supported Turkish accession in 2006. According to a 2005 Eurobarometer survey, 73 percent of Austrians believed that cultural differences between Turkey and the EU were too significant to allow the country's accession. According to the same poll, some 60 percent of Austrians say that religion is irrelevant to the question of whether a country should be permitted to join the EU. Only 28 percent see Europe as a "Christian fortress." In fact, the Austrian Catholic hierarchy has not taken a position against Turkish accession.

Given the prominence of this issue in Austrian politics, it is striking how little knowledge exists in the country about modern Turkey, says the report. Looking at Austria's history and geography schoolbooks, ESI found that Austrian students learn nothing about the modern Turkish Republic.

Many debates on EU enlargement have included intense debates across business associations, trade unions, academic institutions and, of course, the media. By contrast, in the case of Turkey the dynamic has been the reverse and since 2004 Austrian politicians have avoided any serious debate on the merits of a Turkish accession, the report says. "Instead, politicians have played on popular fears and prejudices, absolving themselves of responsibility for the decision by pushing the issue off to a referendum. Public opinion has therefore hardened against Turkish accession," according to the report. It defined the current situation as a vicious cycle, where Austrian politicians are unwilling to address the issue for fear of making themselves easy targets for their political opponents.

The report says the weaker the public debate on Turkey, the more likely it would lead to a referendum on Turkish accession at some point between 2014 and 2020 and the more likely that the proposal would receive a hostile reaction from the Austrian public. Accordingly the report suggests that the prospect of deciding on such a question by a referendum will have serious implications for Austria; it would leave Austria isolated within Europe and individually responsible for a major snub to the Muslim world that would place the country on the frontlines of a global clash of civilizations.

The report concludes by arguing that the alternative to a populist campaign is a dispassionate look at how contemporary Turkey is changing on issues like freedom of expression and the status of women; what accession would really cost; and what kind of adjustment would have to be made in EU institutions. "If it emerges that there are vital Austrian interests that need to be protected, politicians should assess whether there are other strategies available instead of a blunt rejection through a referendum," it says.