



EU AND TURKEY

complementarity to exploit



Murat Daoudov

*Director of EU & International
Relations Union of Municipalities
of Marmara (Turkey)*

Murat Daoudov, giornalista di origini cecene, dopo una lunga esperienza di lavoro a Bruxelles presso il Comune e l'Osservatorio per le Migrazioni, ente del governo belga, ora è responsabile per le relazioni internazionali e affari europei per la più estesa comunità di comuni della regione di Istanbul: l'Unione delle Municipalità di Marmara. Daoudov è un esperto di cooperazione decentrata tra enti locali e progetti di sviluppo, in particolar modo verso i Balcani, il Mar Nero, il Mediterraneo e il Medio Oriente. È socio fondatore dell'Associazione Turca dei Dirigenti degli Enti locali (YÖNDER). Daoudov illustra ai lettori di CT Issues la lunga e controversa relazione tra Unione europea e Turchia, analizzando il ruolo crescente che rivestono i governi locali e la cooperazione decentrata in questo complesso rapporto.

Turkey's increasingly pro-active foreign policy and her involvement in the "near" and "far" neighbourhood are followed with great interest in Europe and in the world. Some observers however seem to be concerned with such developments, arguing that Turkey changes its axis and turns to the East, leaving the European /Western camp. Such concerns are groundless, if we understand rightly the foreign policy promoted by the Turkish government since 2003. On one hand, it makes efforts to realise a concrete breakthrough in the EU-membership deal, and, on the other it privileges its policy of "zero problems with neighbours". Important progress has been realised in both directions, even if much still remains to be done.

Membership process to the EU and increased interaction with neighbours are not mutually excluding options. On the contrary, both developments feed each other. Turkey conflicting with her neighbours, as once it was in the past, wouldn't be a good choice for EU as possible candidate. Today, Turkey's increasing credibility and influence in the region is an asset for Europe; her "Europeanised" and modern character is a source of inspiration and attraction for her partners in the Middle East.

As any "border country", Turkey's destiny is to play the role of bridge. The city of Istanbul reflects perfectly this specific position, often described as "the Asian city closest to Europe and the European city closest to Asia". The Euro-Asian character of Turkey makes her perfect interface between the two worlds. As Mr Egemen Bağış, Turkish Minister for EU affairs, said, "*any bridge with one strong leg and one weak leg can't stand for long*". Both legs must be equally strong. One can compare the responsibilities of Turkey resulting from its particular geographical, cultural and historical position with those of countries like Russia, Egypt or Mexico, all connected to two continents and cultural basins. But Turkey has more. With her historical ties inherited from the Ottoman time, she is linked to three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa.

The European road of Turkey, which is in fact a process started two hundred years ago, has concretised in Turkey's joining of almost all modern Western/European institutions: the Council of Europe, OSCE, OECD, NATO. The EU membership process is very beneficial for Turkey, as it allows her to realise vital reforms. In this respect, Turkey of course needs EU. And EU needs Turkey, if it wishes to increase its influence in the region and play a more efficient global role. Turkey's regional influence is both a complementary and a missing piece in the puzzle of Europe's international involvement. Turkey is realising a remarkable work in the Middle East and North Africa and her action is complementary to Europe's goals. For example, the Euro-Mediterranean "integration", solemnly promised by France and Europe through the Union for Mediterranean project, inevitably lacks credibility in the eyes of those "Mediterraneans" who are separated not only by the sea, but by the restrictive visa walls. In the same time, Turkey lifts visas and courageously opens her doors to all those to whom Europe only locks even more its own. Turkey "*is the only European country where Arabs*

can go without visa”, say Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans and citizen of the Gulf countries. This openness cements the credibility of Turkey’s discourse for partnership and integration.

Local dimension of EU-Turkey deal

Turkey’s political and public administration systems have been very much inspired by France, with, as result, the secular and highly centralised state tradition. However, since 1980’s started the process of strengthening local governments. This process goes in parallel with the general democratisation efforts in the country. Turkey’s “inter-connectedness” with Europe has an important impact on her local authorities. Since the 1990’s, the European Charter of Local Self-Government influenced positively their autonomy. And since 2000’s, the EU integration process and related reforms have influenced them positively. Many new legal instruments have strengthened considerably municipalities and provinces.

Concerning their possible role in the EU integration process, the local authorities in Turkey have great interest for the issue. Since recent years many of them establish “EU offices”. However, in reality local authorities are not really involved in the process of EU integration. The accession issue affects the local authorities much in “top-down” way. Unfortunately, no platform for cooperation and coordination between local and national levels is foreseen in this field. The unions of municipalities, which are the voice of thousands of local authorities, are not properly consulted or informed by the central authorities dealing with the accession. The only indirect “involvement” in the EU issue is provided since recently (2007) through the EU Committee of the Regions’ Working Group on Turkey, with which the Union of Municipalities of Marmara and the Turkish Union of Municipalities actively cooperate. To increase interaction with the European institutions, we support the proposal by CoR to establish a Joint Consultative Committee. For this purpose, the UMM intends to lobby this issue before the central government.


Another proposal by CoR is worth of being seriously discussed. The CoR recommended in the past that a sub-national level should be established in the negotiation process, which would be closely involved in the drafting of strategies and defining priorities for local and regional development and in the subsequent implementation of EU Structural Fund programmes. As the EU accession process is about conforming Turkey to the EU standards, up to 60% of which touch the territorial level, local authorities should have their say in the process which brings a mass of new rules that affect them mostly.

Decentralised cooperation awaits adequate structures

The decentralised cooperation concept is relatively new in Turkey. Especially its systematised and organised application, as practiced in other countries, is something that Turkish local and national actors must learn. The reforms have strengthened the municipalities and provinces and stronger local authorities have naturally more interest and resources for their external involvement. International action of local authorities can also be of a very useful complement to the national foreign policy and can cement the progresses done by central government.

Since the 1990's, the assistance towards counterparts in other regions, such as Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus, Arab world, Africa, is growing. It is influenced by the development of Turkish foreign policy, but also by the encouraging example of the involvement of civil society organisations. The Union of Municipalities of Marmara, the largest regional union of cities in Turkey, embraces fully this vision and acts in line with Turkey's multidimensional international involvement. Sometimes, it goes even before the national level and lays foundations that might reveal themselves useful for the national action. This is very normal, because local authorities are usually praised for their openness, rapid action capacity, open-mindedness and flexibility. Even where governments are in conflict, they can overcome obstacles and prepare ground for cooperation.

However, the increase in the interest of municipalities in international activity and assistance raises the issue of a lack of structures for an "organised decentralised cooperation". Here, Turkey has much to learn from other countries, especially from France, which has developed a mechanism for external coordination between local and central governments. The French National Commission for Decentralised Cooperation brings together two levels to elaborate a common external vision and strategy. The UMM intends to promote this example in Turkey and to work for the establishment of an appropriate interface between various actors of development cooperation. In current situation, everybody works in his corner and is only occasionally informed about the actions of others. At the national level, the work of local authorities is not yet considered as complementary for the national action. The French experience, where the current consciousness and "ownership" was much the fruit of a "bottom-top" approach by local authorities, offers an inspiring example.

 <http://licencethink.blogspot.com/>