‘For or against membership: five questions under discussion' from Le Figaro (16 December 2004)

Caption: On 16 December 2004, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro analyses the arguments for and against Turkey’s possible accession to the European Union.

Source: Le Figaro. 16.12.2004. Paris. "Pour ou contre l'adhésion: cinq questions en débat", auteur:Avril, Pierre , p. 4.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

Some people are delighted at the prospect of Turkey joining Europe; others are worried

For or against membership: five questions under discussion

Brussels: from our correspondent
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If Turkey becomes a member of the European Union in five or ten years' time, Europe will no longer be the same. That is one of the few points on which there is consensus between the pro- and anti-Turkish camps. The impact of its joining, they say, would be cultural, economic, institutional and political. While some are delighted in advance at the idea of a 'big bang', others are afraid of it. The debate between supporters and opponents of Turkish membership centres around five main arguments.

Is Turkey a European country?
Only historians, by going back as far as Byzantium or the peak of the Ottoman Empire, can claim that Turkey is European. Others don't really seek to support such an assertion. The Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, an ardent supporter of Turkish membership, himself admits that 'the cultural heritage' of the country, which is mainly Muslim although secular, is 'different'. That is precisely the point on which the dispute between the pro- and anti-Turkish camps hinges. 'If Turkey joined, it would give a terrific boost to the Islamicisation of Europe, which would lose its character, its roots and its culture,' considers Jean-Marie Le Pen, MEP for the Front National, who also accuses Turkey of not abiding by the Copenhagen political criteria. Some even point to the risk of Islamic terrorism being imported into the present EU.

This 'outdated' vision of Europe is criticised by supporters of membership, who say that the Union is not there to be a 'Christian club'. Turkish accession in that case is seen as an opportunity for enrichment. 'It gives us a wonderful opportunity to show that the fight against terrorism is not a fight against Islam,' says the Vice-President of the Green group, Dany Cohn-Bendit.

Is Turkish membership a factor for stability or instability in the region?
After Turkish accession, the European Union's new neighbours would be Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iraq and Iran. This prospect alone brings people opposed to the process out in a cold sweat, while supporters see it as a political opportunity. Opponents are afraid that Ankara's difficult relations with some of its neighbours will be a source of instability. This applies particularly to Syria and Armenia, with whom it has closed its land borders. What is more, Turkey still opposes a number of European statements made under the common foreign and security policy (CFSP). After joining the EU, it might be prompted to block European foreign policy initiatives (decided on unanimously) which it considers to be against its interests.

From the other angle, pro-accessionists think that a democratic, fully secular Turkey will be a way of containing extremists and exporting the values of the Union. 'If we compare Turkey to today's Iran, it is better to have it in the EU than outside,' is how the Vice-President of the Socialist group in the European Parliament, Pierre Moscovici, sums it up. The European Commission adopts a position mid-way between optimists and doomsayers, analysing the question as follows: 'Turkish accession could help to stabilise the conflict zone of the Middle East, but it would bring the EU into more direct contact with the region's difficult political and security problems.'

Will Turkey lay down the law in the European Union?
With some 86 million inhabitants in 2020, according to UN projections, Turkey, if it were to join, would become the country with the largest population in the EU. The demographic impact of this would create 'a political balance dominated to a very marked degree by Ankara', write the experts in the French Ministry of Finance. In the eyes of opponents of accession, this influence would be so disproportionate that it could lead to paralysis. And it makes them fear that the Union's power would be watered down. Supporters of accession, on the other hand, say that this factor should be seen in context.

The basis of the quarrel lies in the new European Constitution, which gives greater influence to the heavily populated countries. Although Turkey will have an equivalent number of Commissioners to those of the

other countries, it will, on the other hand, have the largest number of MEPs in Strasbourg (somewhere in the region of 80) and a relative majority of votes in the Council. ‘It would be in a position to obstruct 76.5 % of decisions, as opposed to only 55.7 % in the case of France,’ writes Frédéric Bobay of the Ministry of Finance. This would make Ankara the linchpin of any coalition. ‘They won’t be able to call the tune by themselves,’ counters the President of the European University Institute, Yves Mény. As a safety valve, the Constitution does indeed lay down that any blocking minority must include at least four Member States.

Should we be afraid of mass immigration?
Some parties are brandishing the scarecrow of immigration. If Turkey joins, they say, it will lead to a major influx of Turkish workers onto the Union’s labour markets, causing social dumping. The countries in the front line would be Germany, France, the Netherlands and Austria. But the experts are still divided. One independent working party led by the former Finnish President, Martti Ahtissari, puts forward a figure of 2.7 million immigrants in the long term, in other words 0.5 % of the population of the Union. Other studies swing within a bracket ranging from 0.5 to 4 million immigrants between now and 2025–2030. The same kinds of fears were raised before Spain and Portugal joined. They turned out in the end to be unfounded. Britain, Finland and Sweden even think that migratory pressure caused by accession represents an opportunity at a time when European countries will soon be suffering from an ageing of the population. These Member States are in fact opposed to the introduction of a safeguard clause which would allow any country in the Union to close its labour market to Turkish workers permanently.

Will Turkish membership cost the European taxpayer too much?
A country of 80 million people whose wealth represents less than 30 % of that of the 25-member Union is bound to need a lot of money to bring itself up to the same level. Too much money, believes the former Agriculture Commissioner, Franz Fischler, at the very time when large numbers of countries want to make savings: 11.3 billion euros just on agriculture, or as much as the cost of accession for the Ten. ‘Turkey would find it very hard to introduce the common agricultural policy without weakening it,’ says the former Austrian official. On top of this sum are the cohesion funds, which will have to be called upon to provide a probable 10 billion euros a year. That will be a body blow to the EU’s budgetary policy.

Here again, though, other experts give the lie to these prophets of doom. According to the Centre for European Policy Studies, the amount which will have to be paid out for Turkey from 2020 will come to only 0.2 % of EU GDP, or the equivalent of 4 euros per EU citizen per month. ‘That’s a perfectly manageable sum for the EU budget,’ says the Centre. But many of these forecasts come under the heading of political fiction. A true figure will be able to be put on the cost of Turkish membership only when the 2014–2021 financial perspective is negotiated. And at the moment, the 25 EU countries are contenting themselves — painfully — with discussing the 2007–2013 period.