

[Comment] Did Barack Obama talk out of turn about Turkey?

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Today @ 08:19 CET

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - On his tour of Europe earlier this week, US president Barack Obama spoke warmly about the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union. In address to members of the Turkish parliament in Ankara, he observed that "Turkey is bound to Europe by more than bridges over the Bosphorus.

Centuries of shared history, culture, and commerce bring you together. Europe gains by diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith – it is not diminished by it. And Turkish membership would broaden and strengthen Europe's foundation once more."

Those words have led him into a diplomatic and political storm.

French president Nicolas Sarkozy rebuffed his American counterpart in an interview on French television, saying on the subject "When it comes to the European Union it is up to member states of the European Union to decide".

His foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, echoed these remarks. "It's not for the Americans to decide who comes into Europe or not," he said. "We are in charge in our own house."

So what did Barack Obama think he was doing?

The facts about the relationship between Turkey and the EU are quite straightforward. Turkey first applied for membership in 1987 and negotiations are, after a fashion, ongoing. The Copenhagen criteria set down the economic and



"Turkish accession to the EU, or not, may be a European decision, but the Americans are entitled to have a view" (Photo: EUobserver.com)

political conditions for membership and, right now, Turkey falls short of most of them. That in itself is not an obstacle to negotiations about membership, of course: the 10 former communist countries negotiated and reformed at the same time.

The negotiations with Turkey, however, have been remarkably slow, because the EU member states are themselves divided. Countries like Britain are firmly in favour of Turkish membership, while others such as France and Austria are against.

The reasons for these different positions have been well-rehearsed. What's more interesting today is the discussion about who decides and why.

The formal procedure is that negotiations are led by the European Commission, with unanimous agreement by the member states plus the approval of the European Parliament. The member states' views therefore individually matter, as do the views of the MEPs to be elected in June – ask your candidates about this in the coming election campaign – but where does Barack Obama fit in all of that?

The reason lies in the changing nature of EU membership. As time passes, the economic difference for Turkey between membership and non-membership of the EU is likely to decrease, as trading barriers fall and market access increases. Both bilateral and global trade agreements will speed this process along.

On the other hand, the political difference between membership and non-membership is likely to grow. If the EU fulfils the ambitions set out in the Lisbon treaty and becomes a more coherent and influential actor on the world stage, then Turkish membership of the EU will affect both the EU opinion on world events and also the Turkish view of them. Among the issues that might be affected in this way are relations with Iraq and Iran – Turkey shares a border with both of them – and the future security of Israel, with which Turkey has a close relationship. These are questions where the Americans have a strong geopolitical interest, too.

In other words, it's not the economy, stupid.

And Barack Obama understands this. In his own words to the EU leaders at a summit meeting in Prague, he said that "The United States and Europe must approach Muslims as our friends, neighbours and partners in fighting injustice, intolerance and violence. Moving forward towards Turkish membership in the EU would be an important signal of your commitment to this agenda and ensure that

we continue to anchor Turkey firmly in Europe."

No-one can look at the history of the past 100 years and deny that America has an interest in the geopolitical health of Europe. A look at the last 10 years shows how America has an interest in good relations with the Muslim world. Turkish accession to the EU, or not, may be a European decision, but the Americans are entitled to have a view.

Barack Obama gets this too. "It is true that the United States is not a member of the EU, so it's not our decision to take, but that doesn't prevent me from having an opinion," he said.

"I've noticed that the Europeans have a lot of opinions about US policy for a long time and they've not been shy about expressing them. That's what friends do."

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