Note on the state and directions of the Slovenian debate on the prospects of Turkey and Ukraine’s EU membership

Dr. Veronika Bajt
Peace Institute
Ljubljana, Slovenia

1. In Slovenia, the debate on Turkey and Ukraine, what little there is, is a response to the EU agenda. There is no domestic Slovenian significance that would involve either of the two states. Neither the Turks nor the Ukrainians represent a recognisable national group in Slovenia, and this research has found no evidence that would suggest independent societal interest in these two national groups. Slovenia’s official stance towards both Turkey and Ukraine is positive and in favour of further enlargement of the European Union. Almost no public debate, however, exists on these topics and a general conviction is shared by the main stakeholders that Slovenia has little influence on the EU developments. Apart from a few politicians who, for the time being, remain the most prominent stakeholders in the debate on the future EU enlargement, the media follow suit with political analysis and commentary, occasionally involving Turkey, rarely Ukraine, but most often discussing the EU perspective of the Western Balkans, predominantly Slovenia’s southern neighbour Croatia.

2. Slovenia’s government, president, foreign ministry and parliamentary parties all speak in favour of further EU enlargement. All official governmental statements and documents support further EU enlargement, including Turkey, though the Prime Minister Janša has stated that Turkey has yet to fulfil all the political conditions for entering the EU. The official stance of Slovenia is that every state that fulfils all the obligations and conditions set by the EU can become a future member. Slovenia
supports Turkey on its path of becoming a part of the EU and is open to the prospect of one day maybe integrating Ukraine, provided all the necessary conditions are met.

3. The official position is reflected in generally favourable public opinion. The latest (July 2005) Eurobarometer results of measuring public opinion in the EU place Slovenia at the highest level of support for further enlargement. Whereas the EU-25 average support is at 50 percent, Slovenia shows a 79 percent support, a 4 percent increase from the last polling when the Slovenian support was at 75 percent. 53 percent of Slovenian respondents support Turkey’s membership, with 40 percent in opposition. Support for Ukraine in Slovenia is higher. 63 percent are in favour of its EU membership and 25 percent oppose it.

4. Bilateral relations between Slovenia and both Turkey and Ukraine are good, however neither Turkey nor Ukraine plays a major or very visible role in Slovenia’s foreign policy. Slovenia’s foreign policy is in line with the EU, as recently reiterated by the foreign minister Rupel, but integrating the Western Balkans into the EU as soon as possible is a priority. It is the Western Balkans and especially Croatia that are at the top of the Slovenian foreign policy agenda.

5. The President Drnovšek recognises the importance of the question of Turkey’s membership. The fact that Drnovšek, a well-respected and publically influential person, supports further EU enlargement and is in favour of Turkey becoming a member, is important and could potentially influence the positive public stance towards this state. He has also always been stressing the friendly relations between Slovenia and Ukraine, welcoming Ukrainian endeavours for its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Drnovšek reaffirmed that continued enlargement of the EU remains an important issue.

6. All of the interviewed politicians, including the MEPs, have confirmed that the issue of Turkey, let alone the question of Ukraine, has not come up in electoral campaigns. They have also reaffirmed that their Slovenian electorate has so far not demanded any answers or positions on these two issues.
Out of the 7 Slovenian MEPs, 4 belong to the EPP-ED, 2 to ALDE and 1 to PES. 2 EPP members signed the secret ballot proposal. Both Liberal Democrats’ MEPs (ALDE) voted in favour of negotiations with Turkey, as did the Social Democrats’ leader (PES). It is not known how the remaining two Slovenian EPP MEPs voted, though it has been suggested that one was supportive and the other opposing.

7. The strongest party in the parliament is the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), with 2 MEPs in the EPP. The SDS supports the beginning of negotiations with Turkey, while being aware of the doubts some member states and certain EP parties have in this regard. Despite the fact that an official position on Turkey, as well as on Ukraine, is absent from the SDS party programme, the SDS has the same stance as the government. The biggest oppositional party, the Liberal Democrats (LDS), was the ruling party up until the October 2004 elections. It fully supports Turkey’s entry into the European Union. The LDS party programme does not specifically address further EU enlargement but a special interest in the Western Balkans can be detected. The rest of the political parties mirror the overall absence of the debate on Turkey and Ukraine and proclaim a general support for further EU enlargement.

The position of the Slovenian National Party (SNS), nevertheless, is distinctive. On the one hand, their leader Zmago Jelinčič Plemeniti points out that numerous questions are being raised within his party, especially regarding the limits of Europe, but also of Kurdish autonomy within Turkey and regarding human rights. He does not take a stand of either supporting or opposing Turkey’s EU membership, but he is of opinion that enlargement weakens the EU. His party colleague Bogdan Barovič, on the other hand, has made it clear that the SNS “absolutely does not oppose the further EU enlargement” claiming that Slovenia’s position should be one of “supporting negotiations with all the states who fulfil the conditions”. As the nationalist parties are usually against the Turkish membership in the EU, the SNS represents one very big exception; a Turkish-Slovenian inter-parliamentary friendship group has even been set up and the chairman is Bogdan Barovič of the SNS, while 3 more SNS MPs, including Jelinčič, are members.

8. In Slovenia, public debate on the European future of either Turkey or Ukraine is limited to the politicians and the media. Civil society seems to be a disinterested bystander. The public debate on Turkey and Ukraine remains a non-issue in Slovenia, thus posing no immediate requirement of the NGOs and civil society groups to take a public stand of either support or opposition to their potential EU membership. This was confirmed with their visible absence from the participation in the national Forum/roundtable on Turkey and Ukraine’s possible future EU membership organised by the Peace Institute this November in Ljubljana.
9. Media coverage of further enlargement to include Turkey is mostly factual, without much analysis or commentary. The debate about the prospect of a future Ukrainian EU membership is not present in Slovenia, as Ukraine is not a candidate country. The media coverage in the case of Ukraine intensified with the period of Ukrainian presidential elections and the so-called Orange Revolution. The reporting on Turkey increases whenever the focus turns to Turkey either in the EU institutions or in one of the bigger EU member states, particularly Germany, Austria or France, or when ‘attention grabbing’ events take place in Turkey itself. All the Slovenian dailies rely heavily on press agencies, either the Slovenian STA (Slovenska tiskovna agencija) or foreign press agencies, predominantly just summarising or copying their reports.

10. **Turkey**: It seems that in Slovenia the ‘big picture’ reasoning prevails; the most prominent argument for Turkey’s accession is its geopolitical and strategic position. Its inclusion into the European Union would mean a warranty for peace in Europe, and stability and democratisation in the region. Turkey’s accession is also supported on account of its contribution to the fight against terrorism and the fundamentalist Islam. In terms of culture certain experts argue that Turkey’s EU membership would provide a bridge between the ‘West’ and Islam. Accepting Turkey among the EU states would further mean the beginning of actual coexistence and peace ‘between civilisations’. In short, Turkey’s membership would contribute to the so-called dialogue of cultures. Very few particularly Slovenian arguments have been pointed out. As a small member state, Slovenia would prefer to have a more diversified EU and Turkey’s inclusion would mean a different physiognomy of the Union. It has been argued that small states have no reason to oppose Turkey’s entry since the weight of decision-making would be shifted from the old member states more to the new members. Ukraine’s entry would have the same effect. The most commonly voiced concern regarding the prospect of Turkey entering the EU relates to the question of European borders. Even the proponents of Turkey’s membership have often pointed out that the EU is in crisis and it is therefore its priority to consolidate. The need to discuss the question of the EU’s will for further enlargement is also brought forward in Slovenia. Those few sceptical voices that could conditionally represent a feeble Slovenian opposition to Turkey’s membership have all exposed the issue of limits to the future EU enlargement. On the overall, the sentiment seems to be neutral and in
the position of ‘giving Turkey a chance’ to remedy its maladies and fulfil all the obligations.

11. **Ukraine**: The issue of Ukraine possibly becoming a EU member state is not debated in Slovenia. Ukraine’s post-Orange Revolution political transition is occasionally discussed, yet no debate about the specific Slovenian interests has so far been included in the limited discussion that there is about this country. Ukraine is generally seen as a prospective market for Slovenian economy and it has been mentioned that Ukraine is more important for the Slovenian interests than Turkey. While in regard to Turkey the opposition often claims that the majority of its territory lies outside of Europe, there is little or no dispute over Ukraine lying within the European geographical boundaries. Compared to Turkey and its long wait in front of the EU door, Ukraine is in a different situation altogether. Not yet even a candidate country, the Slovenians pay it little attention. Only one possible opposing view was identified and it relates to the fact that the EU already has enough problems at the moment. Bringing forth the question of Ukraine’s membership would thus additionally burden the EU public in the current situation of crisis.