

Turkey-EU relations: time to rebuild trust

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Ever since Turkey and the EU began membership negotiations in 2005, the process has been riddled with difficulties which have impacted on broader Turkey-EU ties. Relations took a further blow last week following the publication of the European Commission's 2012 Progress Report. Out of the fifteen reports that Turkey has received to date, this was one of the hardest-hitting in recent times, criticising Ankara in several areas.

The report produced an out-pouring of anger and frustration from Ankara. Turkey's Minister for European Integration and Chief Negotiator Egemen Bagis launched a scathing attack, declaring the report reflected "the efforts of the EU, which is in a financial economic and political crisis, to delay Turkey's EU membership with various excuses".

It is quite a paradoxical situation, On the one hand, the EU declares Turkey to be a key economic and political partner with which it desires an increasingly close relationship. EU foreign policy chief Baroness Catherine Ashton regularly describes Turkey as a crucial foreign policy partner, including as a conduit between the EU and the Arab world. On the other hand, Turkey's accession talks remain frozen, which has impacted on Turkey's willingness to carry out EU-related reforms and has eroded trust between the two partners. This vicious circle continues to poison relations and needs to be broken.

Talks deadlocked

Not a single negotiating chapter has been opened for over two years. 13 of the 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, but only one of those (science and research) has been provisionally closed. Eight chapters were frozen by the EU Council in December 2006 over the Cyprus dispute, and five chapters were blocked by France for political reasons when former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president in 2007. A further seven chapters were blocked by Cyprus in December 2009. Only three chapters remain – competition policy, social policy and employment, and public procurement. All three are difficult, with tough opening benchmarks. Candidates usually open these chapters towards the end of the negotiating process, when membership is assured.

In an effort to put some momentum back into relations, the EU launched a new "Positive Agenda" earlier this year. The agenda intended to speed up Turkey's compliance with the *acquis communautaire* in eight chapters. It was not aimed at replacing the accession process, but at complementing it. Thus far there have been no concrete results, although intensive work is ongoing in a number of different areas such as trade, energy, and justice and home affairs.

Tough opposition from some member states to Turkey's accession, the unresolved Cyprus conflict, Europe's economic and political crises, and rising anti-Islamic sentiment, combined with Turkey's ever-more assertive approach – a result of its increasingly influential role as a regional and economic player – has proven a significant obstacle to changing the *status quo*. It has also resulted in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) no longer feeling inclined to listen to Brussels: rather, the AKP believes Brussels should listen to Turkey.

A regressive rather than a progressive report

Overall the report paints a realistic picture of developments in the country. While some important reforms have taken place, such as elective Kurdish language courses in schools, it is evident that the once strong reform drive has not been consolidated or built upon. Rather it has slowed, becoming patchy and inconsistent, with the AKP becoming progressively selective over which reforms it chooses to make. Many reforms are only partially adopted or implemented.

There are growing concerns over the lack of progress towards fully meeting the political criteria of EU membership, recurring infringements of the right to liberty, security and fair trial, and progressive curtailment of freedom of expression, assembly and association. There is unease over the concentration of power within the hands of the AKP, slow and inconsistent judicial reform, and the growing number of court cases against journalists and writers. Scores of journalists are now in prison. The Kurdish issue also remains a key challenge, with an already difficult situation being exacerbated over the last few months by increased attacks by the Kurdish Workers

Party (PKK) terrorist organisation, not least as a consequence of turmoil in Syria and Turkey's failed Syria policy. Furthermore, while the EU welcomes Ankara's work towards a new Constitution via a participatory process, there is concern that Turkey's leadership seems to be ignoring many of the recommendations of the Venice Commission, with Prime Minister Erdogan – who has his eye on presidential elections in 2014 – seemingly set on turning Turkey into a semi-presidential system, even though this contradicts the Venice Commission's advice and is far from popular among the population.

All stick and no carrot

The EU accession process has been a crucial tool in bringing about the democratic transformation and modernisation of Turkey. It gave Ankara benchmarks and standards, acting as a crucial instrument in strengthening values and freedoms, and was a key tool in diminishing the over-powering role of the military. However, the job remains only half-done and there is a big risk of backsliding. The challenges to Turkey's democratic consolidation, such as the Kurdish issue, have multiplied. Furthermore, even Kurdish nationalists – traditionally one of the most pro-EU constituencies – seem to have lost interest, viewing EU conditionality on minority rights as too timid. As a consequence of the regression in ties, the EU's traditional stick and carrot strategy no longer works, because the EU has, to all intents and purposes, removed the carrot and is only using the stick. Furthermore, the fact that Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), is also disillusioned with the EU, means there is presently no major political force in Ankara pushing the AKP.

The situation is ironic because, as European Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Füle has pointed out, Turkey remains a country of "vital and increasing importance". A good example of this comes *vis-à-vis* the EU's energy security. Turkey is set to become a crucially important energy hub and transit state for European energy projects within the Southern Corridor, with gas pipelines crisscrossing the country connecting Azerbaijan, Iraq, Russia and possibly Iran one day to the European market. This will give Turkey a significant amount of political leverage over its partners both in the EU and elsewhere. It would thus be in the interests of the EU to finalise negotiations on the energy chapter. Yet this chapter remains blocked. As Füle stated on the eve of the Progress Report, "the EU is shooting itself in the foot".

Can this situation be turned around?

While it is obvious that Turkey's EU membership remains a distant prospect – and indeed may never materialise – there is nevertheless an urgent need work towards rebuilding trust and inject some new momentum back into relations. With 2013 set to mark the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Association Agreement between Turkey and the EU, this would seem to be an opportune moment.

Firstly, concrete steps need to be taken towards visa liberalisation. Between 2008 and 2010, five countries in the Western Balkans concluded talks on visa-free travel, although at that point none were candidate countries. Today, the EU is in the midst of a visa liberalisation processes with Moldova and Ukraine, neither of which even have membership perspectives. Turks, as citizens of a candidate country, believe they should have been the first to obtain a visa liberalisation regime, rather than being last on the list. While in mid-2012 fresh steps were taken towards granting Turkey a visa liberalisation roadmap, some obstacles remain, including related to the signing of a Readmission Agreement, which Turkey refuses to do until it has seen the roadmap. Still, there is cautious optimism that by the end of the year, the process will have progressed.

A second step would be to make substantial progress on a number of issues on the 'Positive Agenda' – in particular related to further EU efforts to support Turkey's fight against the PKK and its European support network, as well as speeding up efforts to resolve a number of long-term difficulties Turkey has with its EU Customs Union. Finally, the unblocking of some of the chapters presently held hostage by France would clearly be a big boost and demonstrate French President François Hollande's commitment to improving ties with Turkey.

Of course, some serious obstacles will remain, not least the issue of Cyprus (although there may be an opportunity for a contextual change here after the 2013 Cypriot presidential election), but offering Turkey a few smaller carrots would at least send a positive message that the EU recognises the importance of Turkey by more than just words, thereby breaking the vicious circle of blame, while also giving support to those circles in Turkey (civil society, business) that still have leverage on the government and are able to push it to restart the stalled reform and democratisation process.

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