

## The Turkey-EU deadlock

*Amanda Paul*

Turkey's EU membership negotiations enter 2011 in dire straits. The Turkey-EU-Cyprus triangle, opposition from a number of member states, and Ankara's growing disillusionment over what it considers to be an insincere EU approach, is proving to be a potent mix which is eroding relations. A vicious circle of blame is becoming increasingly difficult to break and, unless there is a change in approach, accession talks are set to remain in a dangerous deadlock.

### **A cursed negotiation process**

Since negotiations began in October 2005 only 13 of the 35 chapters have been opened, with just one provisionally closed. Eighteen chapters are frozen due to vetoes by Cyprus, France or the European Council as a whole, with only three chapters remaining - competition policy, social policy and employment, and public procurement.

While the French block a handful for political reasons the majority are blocked due to Turkey's failure to meet its Customs Union obligations fully vis-à-vis Cyprus. Until now Turkey has refused to do this, until the EU delivers on its own "promises", in line with the unanimous decision of the EU Council of 26 April 2004, to the Turkish Cypriots. This was made following the 2004 UN Annan Plan Referendum for the reunification of Cyprus, when Turkish Cypriots voted "yes" while Greek Cypriots voted "no" only for Cyprus to become an EU member a week later. As something of a consolation prize the EU offered the Turkish Cypriots an economic package including a Direct Trade Regulation. However, the Regulation has never materialised due to Greek Cypriot opposition. The Greek Cypriots view it as a step towards recognition of the Turkish Cypriot administration.

As a result, confidence in the EU has decreased amongst Turks. The reform process has slowed, becoming increasingly patchy, while difficult reforms linked to some of the remaining chapters, such as the informal economy and child labour, have been opposed by some business circles. Turks feel less inclined to support something that may negatively affect their industry and commerce if, in the end, the door to the EU remains closed. With the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) not demonstrating much support for the EU beyond lip-service, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has come under little pressure to speed up implementation of legislation or move ahead with new reforms.

With parliamentary elections slated for June, the AKP is now switching to "campaign mode" and beginning to pursue a domestic/nationalist agenda. A number of recent statements from Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, labeling the EU as a spent force lacking vision and leadership, are evidence of this, despite the rigorous work of Chief Negotiator Egemen Bağış and his team.

### **It's all about Cyprus**

While the opposition of key member states, France and Germany, the economic crisis, and the fact that it has almost become socially acceptable to be anti-Muslim, are serious problems, they are longer term issues. Leaders and circumstances change and with Turkey's possible membership at least 10 years away nobody can predict the future today. Therefore, these issues should not be extravagantly blown up and used as an excuse to hide behind. It is also worth recalling that Turkey is the recipient of significant support from several other big member states.

However, without a solution to the decades old Cyprus problem, Turkey cannot join the EU. Unfortunately the EU is not a neutral player on Cyprus, as was made clear during the recent visit

to Cyprus of German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, when she openly blamed one party for the ongoing difficulties in the peace talks. Coming a few weeks before a crucial meeting between the leaders of the two Cypriot communities with the UN Secretary General in Geneva, her timing could hardly have been worse. Unfortunately, Cyprus has been used by external forces for centuries, and it seems the trend is set to continue as the island and its problem are exploited by anti-Turkish accession leaderships.

### **Parliamentary elections & breaking the deadlock**

There is every chance that the accession process will remain deadlocked in 2011 following the opening of the competition policy chapter, and even beyond, given that 2012 will see the EU Cypriot Presidency as well as French Presidential elections. No doubt some member states will be hoping that Turkey's patience will snap and Ankara will draw a line under its own membership process, but this is unlikely. Contrary to the AKP's recent rhetoric, it needs the EU badly. Firstly to continue the reform process; secondly to maintain stable and continuous foreign direct investment, and thirdly, vis-à-vis its own legitimacy with stories of a hidden agenda still rife.

A solution to the Cyprus problem would open the path for Turkey. However, while some progress has been made in the peace talks, there are still many gaps to be bridged. Sensitive issues such as property, power-sharing, security and territory are far from being agreed, and with Cypriot parliamentary elections in May, it would seem unlikely that an agreement will be reached in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, there is still space to maneuver and Turkey may decide to take action after the elections. Current polls indicate that the AKP is heading for a big victory. Quite how big depends on two factors: whether the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) passes the 10% threshold required to enter Parliament, and how Erdoğan works his campaign in the South East of the country to get maximum support from the Kurds. He will need to weigh this carefully because if he decides to make new gestures towards the Kurds it may result in a loss of nationalist votes. If Erdoğan's "nationalist campaign" is successful and he keeps the MHP out of Parliament, the AKP could end up with around 400 seats of the 550 seat body given the CHP is not expected to gain much ground. Thereby Erdoğan would return with a hefty mandate giving him the power to make serious decisions. A new Constitution will be a priority and with his eye on the 2012 Presidential election he is likely to include changes that would move Turkey towards a Presidential system like France.

With possibly only 12-months left as Prime Minister, given it looks likely Erdoğan has a good chance of being Turkey's next President, he may decide to tackle Cyprus head-on, to keep relations with the EU moving. Big business in Turkey has apparently been silently pushing the government to meet its commitments vis-à-vis the Additional Protocol, opening airports and harbours, so he should have support for this. This would unblock the impasse and breathe fresh air into the negotiations. Whether it would result in the EU finally delivering then Direct Trade Regulation to the Turkish Cypriots is still highly questionable.

Furthermore, it should not be ruled out that Ankara may also take steps regarding the solution of the Cyprus problem. But Turkey cannot do this alone and would need the strong commitment and support from other players, particularly Greece. This could be a joint Ankara-Athens initiative, which could then be supported by others including the UN, US and EU.

However, if no progress is made on Cyprus, the membership talks will eventually stop. With this outcome the EU will need to find a way of keeping Ankara anchored in the EU orbit beyond the accession process if Turkey is not to "slip away". If the EU and Turkey were able to work constructively together in other areas such as energy, foreign policy, trade and security, opposition may slowly diminish. Speeding up Turkey's process towards a visa-free regime would also signal that the EU is ready to embrace Turkey, which is, after all, a crucial economic and political partner.

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