

From Dream to Farce: Turkey's EU Membership

Written by Amanda Paul

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AMANDA PAUL, OCT 15 2012

Ever since Turkey and the EU began membership negotiations in 2005, the process has been riddled with difficulties. Today it seems increasingly unlikely that Turkey will ever join, with Ankara's onetime EU dream, nowadays on the rocks. Moreover, as the EU has sunk into recession as a consequence of the Euro-zone crisis, Turkey has enjoyed a period of economic boom. This has led many in the country to believe Ankara is better off out of the malaise-ridden EU any way.

A Deadlocked Process

Over the last seven years there has been a gradual deterioration in Turkey's membership talks and for the last three years, to all intents and purposes, negotiations have been frozen. While Turkey is not without fault, it is the EU that must shoulder most of the blame. Membership negotiations are supposed to be technical in character. Unfortunately, Turkey's became increasingly politicized as a result of the strong opposition from a number of member states, including France and Germany. This led to the unnecessary blocking of several negotiating chapters. This was compounded by the unresolved Cyprus problem, which almost totally dead-locked the process.

Today 13 of the 35 chapters have been opened, with just one (science and research) provisionally closed. Eighteen chapters are frozen because of vetoes by Cyprus, France, Germany or the European Council as a whole, with only three chapters remaining – competition policy, social policy and employment, and public procurement. All three are difficult and expensive chapters with tough opening benchmarks. However, the majority of those blocked are under veto by Cyprus because of Turkey's failure to fulfill its obligation of full, non-discriminatory implementation of its Customs Union with the EU, which would mean opening its ports and airspace to Republic of Cyprus vessels and planes. Turkey, which does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, has refused to do this until the EU fulfills what Ankara claims it promised to do in the aftermath of the 2004 UN Annan Plan referendum. In May 2004 Turkish Cypriot's voted yes to the reunification of Cyprus while Greek Cypriots voted no. In the aftermath the EU committed itself to help lift the economic isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. One of the proposed initiatives was direct trade. Until now this has never been achieved due to Greek Cypriot opposition.

Slowing Reforms and Backsliding Democracy

As a result of the EU's approach, Ankara, as well as Turkish society as a whole, began to increasingly view the EU has a dishonest and underhand partner, which was playing by two sets of rules. Fed-up with hearing Turkey was not European and therefore unsuitable for membership, Ankara became increasing disillusioned which consequently impacted on the reform process. Reforms began to slow down, becoming very patchy and inconsistent. Indeed Turkey has grown progressively selective over the reforms it chooses to do, with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), frequently choosing those that are beneficial to its own interests. More worrying still, is the fact that as the EU lost leverage over Ankara, democracy in Turkey began to slide backwards, particularly in areas such as fundamental rights and freedoms. Freedom of the media is a particular concern with around 100 journalists languishing in jail. In percentage of population this is a higher number than in China.

Moreover two controversial trials "Ergenekon" and "Sledgehammer" have polarized the country. For some they represent a historic step in Turkey's democratization process while for others they are viewed as politically motivated

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revenge. Sledgehammer which is seen as a struggle between the military and the AKP, recently resulted in some 333 military officers being jailed on charges of plotting a coup against the government. Meanwhile, hundreds of journalists, academics, politicians and writers remain behind bars, awaiting trial under "Ergenekon". Ergenekon is described as a clandestine criminal network alleged to have links within the state and suspected of plotting to topple the government. Both Sledgehammer and Ergenekon have raised concerns in the EU. This has been compounded by fears that Prime Minister Erdogan, in power since 2002 and with his eye on a revamped, executive presidency, is becoming just as authoritarian and over-bearing as the generals once were. Under a new law passed by the AKP, Turks will choose their first directly elected president in 2014. The current president, Abdullah Gul, is a long-time Erdogan ally who owes his post to the prime minister. Under the 2012 law, Gul is barred from standing again, while the prime minister can stand without first resigning. Many Turks suspect that in Putin-style, Erdogan will simply swap jobs.

While Turkey has pushed ahead with some new reforms such as the third judicial reform package and steps to offer Kurdish as an elective language in Turkish schools, at the same time there is an urgent need for further judicial reform, and a further strengthening of the rule of law. Moreover Turkey needs to address the serious problem of broad interpretations by courts hearing terrorism-related cases. A clearly distinction needs to be made between incitement to violence and the non-violent expression of ideas.

Meanwhile the EU has also been encouraging Ankara to speed up the process of drafting a new civilian constitution, something which is crucial for Turkey's democratization. Unfortunately, while the government claimed this to be a priority in the aftermath of the August 2011 parliamentary election, the process has stalled. A new constitution is important as it will act as a catalyst and provide a basis for further progress as regards the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms in Turkey

The Cyprus Problem

However, it is Cyprus that remains the most significant obstacle to membership because the EU made a solution to the decade's old Cyprus problem a pre-condition for membership. Interestingly the same pre-condition was not made for the entry of the Republic of Cyprus to join the EU in 2004.

For over four decades efforts to reunify Cyprus have all failed. Unfortunately the latest round of talks which began in 2008, for a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation, has also recently run out of steam. The situation has been further aggravated by the RoC's exploration for hydrocarbons in the eastern Mediterranean. With the RoC currently holding the EU's rotating Presidency, this has also had a negative impact on the process with Turkey refusing the deal with the Presidency.

A New Positive Agenda

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 is not aimed at replacing the accession process but complement it.

Among other things, the EU declared that it would take measures to iron out a number of problems related to the EU-Turkey Customs Union while at the same time making a greater effort to support Turkey in its fight against the terrorist organization, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

However, without doubt, the most important element of the new agenda, are the steps taken towards visa liberalization. After membership, visa liberalization is the most important fruit on the EU tree, as it is of something of real benefit to ordinary people. Turkey remains the only EU candidate country does not have a free visa regime with the EU. Moreover, the fact that countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and, very shortly, Russia, are already negotiating visa liberalization has left Turk's feeling bitter. Until recently, a handful of member states including Germany, Austria, Cyprus and the Netherlands, have strongly opposed offering Turkey this. However, before the summer a breakthrough took place and it is hoped that Turkey will be given a road map for visa liberalization by the

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end of this year.

Turkey has Benefited from the EU

Without doubt and whether Ankara likes to admit it or not, the EU accession process has been a crucial tool in the democratization, and modernization of Turkey. It has given Ankara benchmarks and standards and has been a crucial instrument in strengthening values and freedoms, with the political, social and economic transformation of Turkey in recent years, undeniable. Ten years ago, Turkey was something of a failed state, an aid receiving country, on the brink of economic collapse. It was certainly no democratic role model or inspiration. Today it's economic situation has turned around; Turkey has become a significant regional power with Ankara increasingly acting as a bridge and is set to become a crucially important energy hub and transit state, perhaps the most important in the world, for European energy projects. This in itself will give Turkey a considerable amount of leverage over its partners in the EU. Moreover Turkey has become something of an inspiration for many of the populations of the Arab world.

Is There Any Hope?

Today, even with the change of leadership in France, Turkish membership remains very unpopular with the leaderships of a number of member states, as well as with EU citizens. Apart for the Euro-Zone crisis, a rise in far-right political groups and the legacy of the previous enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria have played into the increasing anti-enlargement sentiment in the EU. The fact that both Romania and Bulgaria still fail to adhere to EU values, and there has been a number of cases of democratic backsliding in several new member states, has made the EU increasingly skeptical over further enlargement.

Yet, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring there has been a renewed interest in the EU from Turkish society. This is probably a direct consequence of the turmoil and instability in the North Africa/Middle Eastern region, in particular Syria, that has penetrated Turkey.

However, this is not likely to make much difference to Turkey's politicians. Contrary to the slogans that still come from the lips of Turkish politicians, EU membership is no-longer a priority for Turkey. Yet the renewed efforts from the side of the EU to "reset and strengthen" relations with Turkey are evidence that the EU recognizes the importance of Turkey. While Turkey's leadership may now pompously state, that it is not Turkey that needs the EU, but rather it is the EU that needs Turkey, the relationship is actually far more interdependent that Turkey likes to admit. For example, Turkish entrepreneurs in Europe run businesses worth €40 billion, employing half a million people. In sectors like aviation, automobiles and electronics, the economies are increasingly integrated.

However, the EU's new agenda is primarily aimed at improving the broader Turkey-EU relationship, rather than increasing the likelihood of Turkish membership. Therefore it seems that Turkey's EU process could remain stationary for the foreseeable future, if not forever.

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