

A new chapter in Turkey's struggle with terrorism Implications for the EU accession process

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Summary

Turkey remains committed to EU accession, and Brussels should take note of its efforts to fight terrorism and to promote peace and mutual understanding between all its citizens, heard participants in this Briefing.

Full Report

Negotiating EU accession on behalf of Turkey is not easy, and no new chapters have been opened for five EU presidencies (almost two-and-a-half years). But that doesn't mean that the reform process in Turkey has stopped: in fact it is continuing apace, said **Egemen Bağış**, Turkey's **Minister for EU Affairs** and **Chief Negotiator** on EU accession.

Minister Bağış said the European Commission's latest progress report had revealed that with one chapter already closed, Turkey had made progress in 32 of the 33 chapters of the EU *acquis*. He pointed out that progress had even been made on the 17 blocked chapters.

He said the Irish EU Presidency had heralded positive change and a change of mood towards Turkey in many EU capitals, creating a more positive atmosphere.

Bağış was pleased that new French President François Hollande had promised to unblock one of the five accession chapters frozen by his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy. He expressed hope that the chapter on monetary policy would be opened under the upcoming Lithuanian EU Presidency.

Complaining that a total of 14 accession chapters were currently blocked either unilaterally by Nicosia or by the Council as a whole due to the Cyprus problem, Bağış nevertheless welcomed the election of new Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades (who had campaigned for a 'yes' to the Annan Plan) and expressed hope that it would open a new window of opportunity for a breakthrough between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots.

The Turkish official argued that because resolving the Cyprus issue was not a prerequisite for the accession to the EU of the Republic of Cyprus, nor should it become a prerequisite for Turkey's EU membership. But unfortunately in the real world, the blocked chapters were giving off that image, he said.

Bağış said that Turkey is willing to open its airports, sea ports and airspace to Greek Cypriots, provided that the Council decision of 26 April 2004 (calling for direct trade with Northern Cyprus) is implemented. Allowing direct flights between the EU and Northern Cyprus is feasible and would boost trade, argued Bağış, pointing out that most countries allow direct flights to and trade heavily with Taiwan despite not formally recognising it.

Sounding a hopeful note, Bağış argued that for the first time, Cyprus has an elected president who believes in the unification of the island. He recalled Anastasiades' vision: if Cypriots had accepted the Annan Plan, a unified Cyprus would probably have been one of Europe's fastest-growing economies and the EU's most prosperous nation by now.

Instead, due to the lack of a solution and the enduring uncertainty about the island's future, there has been little investment in Cyprus, particularly in the South, argued Bağış. He expressed hope that Anastasiades would reach out to his Turkish-Cypriot neighbours and pave the way for a solution.

Visa liberalisation granting Turkish citizens free access to the Schengen area would be a more important step than opening 10 accession chapters, because the visa issue has a direct effect on Turkish public opinion vis-à-vis Europe, Bağış argued.

He said that Ankara had already initialled the readmission agreement about which the EU was so sensitive, and was now trying to negotiate a roadmap towards visa liberalisation.

Alluding to Turkey's so-called "solution process," Bağış described terrorism as one of the biggest issues facing the country today and said that putting it to an end is a national (rather than just a Kurdish) issue.

Finding new means of creating empathy and mutual understanding of all the different cultures living alongside one another in Turkey is a new stage in the democratisation process and involves not just the Kurds but every single citizen: indeed the whole nation, he said.

Conceding that in the past people may have been afraid to admit they were Kurds, Bağış pointed out that there are now 24 hours of Kurdish broadcasting on state television, and that prison inmates can now speak to their visiting mothers in their mother tongue. Politicians can campaign in their ethnic language, different ethnic cultures can be studied at university, and progress has been made regarding Turkey's Armenian and Roma minorities too, he said.

Moreover, he said that information about the Alawite community's interpretation of Islam is now in school textbooks, and pointed out that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the first Turkish prime minister to have dined with Alawite religious leaders during their holy month.

Bağış argued that this home-grown process of understanding different cultures, treating every citizen as equal and putting an end to terrorism is all about respecting people's ethnicity, language, political views and lifestyles – and about showing all citizens of Turkey that their common goals are greater than their differences.

Explaining that citizens of Turkey would have to go through a process of understanding one another and being sensitive to each other's cultures, he argued that bloodshed, fire and devastation had gone on for far too long.

Promising that the government would work even harder to ensure sustainable peace and mutual understanding, Bağış said that a group of 63 wise people is touring Turkey to explain the importance of this new phase.

He said history is being rewritten and that citizens should be proud of how as a nation they are embracing one another again, and added that the government had analysed how countries like Spain and the UK dealt with their internal terrorism problems.

He expressed hope that by putting the problem of terrorism behind it, Turkey could give its EU negotiation process a boost. He admitted that when Turkey had this image of internal terrorism being a problem, it was not easy for some European capitals to accept notions of visa liberalisation or its membership of the EU.

Bağış argued that every student should be able to access higher education, adding that Turkey is building new universities to ensure that there are universities in every province.

He declared that the government is ready to serve every citizen equally and without discrimination, but that doesn't mean that it is giving in to terrorism at home. If terrorism stops, then there is no need for counter-attacks, he pointed out.

Turkey's fight against terrorism is a reaction to an action, he said, arguing that if there is no action then there is no need for a reaction.

He said the government considers the 63 wise people to be symbolic representatives of Turkish society. The group contains people from all over Turkey and from all walks of life, he explained. Every minister is going to different parts of Turkey to listen to citizens and to explain this new phase to them, he added.

Bağış stressed the importance of spreading the word in Europe that those who doubted Turkey's EU process should revisit their ideas in terms of its EU membership. "It's a new Turkey that we're very proud of," he declared.

He expressed hope that Turkey would have a new civilian constitution within a year. A cross-party committee has already reached agreement on some parts of the text. Each party in parliament has since submitted to the speaker its own full constitution text, and discussions are currently taking place on how these four different texts can be consolidated into one which can then be put to the people by referendum if needed, he explained.

He expressed hope that putting an end to terrorism would trigger investment in South-East Turkey and also attract tourism, and hoped that future generations would look back with admiration on the politically risky but necessary steps that the current government was taking. The government needs the full support of its EU partners – particularly in fighting terrorism, he added.

Bağış said that terrorism has its winners, warning that associated crime like weapons and drug trafficking gives some people very profitable sources of income and that certain individuals and groups will do anything they can to prevent the peace process from succeeding.

He concluded by calling for the full support of Turkey's allies in overcoming such resistance and for help with navigating through this delicate period.

Discussion

Turkey's EU accession is an increasingly bumpy ride, said **European Policy Centre Chief Executive Hans Martens**, warning that the current ambience is not conducive to a close relationship between the EU and Turkey – and is leading to Turkish ambivalence towards the EU.

Asked whether the Turkish government, elite and population at large were still interested in joining the EU, **Egemen Bağış**, Turkey's **Minister for EU Affairs** and **Chief Negotiator** on EU accession, said this could eventually be put to the test by holding a referendum on EU membership in Turkey.

He turned the question around by wondering whether the EU was really serious about admitting Turkey. The Turkish government is certainly interested in the EU, he said, pointing to the creation two years ago of a ministry dedicated to it.

Opinion polls show that support for EU membership among the Turkish population is currently around 50%, but when you ask people whether they genuinely believe Turkey will one day be admitted, the figure falls to around 25%, he said.

75% of the population believe the reforms carried out in the framework of the EU accession process are good for Turkey, he added.

Asked to outline his view on 50 years of Turkey's EU integration, Bağış said many Turks believe the EU has a credibility problem after 50 years of unkept promises. But despite this, the associated reform process has helped Turkey immensely, he argued, boosting per capita income and tourism.

20 years ago people were still afraid to admit their own religious or ethnic identity. Now it is a country whose taboos are in the past and where daily discussions take place on every possible issue, he said.

He argued that as a result of reforms made in the framework of the EU accession process, today's Turkey is a much more prosperous, democratic place. Describing the EU as Turkey's dietician, he argued that when it implements the prescription from Brussels (the *acquis*), it becomes healthier.

Commenting on the role that the military plays in modern Turkey, Bağış argued that the military-civilian relationship is becoming increasingly European. He further argued that the Turkish military has always been at the forefront of Turkey's modernisation, and pointed out that most of the founders of the Republic were in the military.

He said the military has respected the Europeanisation and modernisation of Turkey, and it no longer views the country's internal diversity as a threat: it is of the same understanding that this in fact makes Turkey richer.

Asked how the situation in Syria is affecting Turkey's own fight against terror, Bağış said it is posing problems not just for Turkey's own terrorism issue but also throughout the Middle East. If your neighbour's house is on fire but you don't help them to put it out, it may one day burn your home too, he warned.

He argued that the international community is acting as decisively as it should to end the bloodshed in Syria, and stressed that Turkey was the first country in the Islamic world to insist that Bashar al-Assad had to go. No leader who bombs his own cities and kills his own people can remain in power, he added.

As for who will lead Syria once Assad has gone, he said that Turkey would respect the democratic choice of the Syrian people, because they deserve to choose their own leaders. The elephant in the room, he acknowledged, is that we need to convince Russia to stop supporting "the killing machine" in Syria.

Asked whether a new privileged relationship with Turkey could trigger the growth that the Cypriot economy so urgently needs, Bağış argued that both Turkey and Cyprus would prosper from full access to each other's ports and airspace.

He promised that any settlement deal supported by both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots would have the full backing of Turkey provided that it were based on political equality. But he stressed that ultimately it is up to Cypriots themselves to decide if they want to live together.

Asked about religious freedom, he said that the Turkish government is righting the wrongs of the past by returning property seized from religious minorities in the past, and stressed that in Turkey everyone is free to practise the religion of their choice.