

The EU is like a dietician

The accession negotiations of the EU with Turkey could experience a new upswing soon

Since 2005, negotiations are held between Brussels and Ankara for a possible membership of Turkey in the European Union. Negotiations on 35 accession chapters which all include acts, directives and regulations of the European Union advance only slowly. Only one of 35 chapters (“Science and research”) was concluded and only 12 other chapters have been opened since 2010. Some EU member States, including France, block the opening of further chapters. In February this year, Paris announced though that it does not want to hamper the negotiations on chapter 22, which is about regional policy. Among other things to promote Turkey in the process of joining the European Union, the Turkish Minister for European Affairs Mr. Egemen Bagis made a working visit to Luxembourg yesterday, where he met the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Jean Asselborn, the Minister of Finance Mr. Luc Frieden, the Minister of Economy, Mr. Etienne Schneider and the President of the Parliament Mr. Laurent Mosar.

After the meeting between Mr. Egemen Bagis and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Jean Asselborn yesterday morning, the head of the Luxembourg diplomacy required that negotiation chapter 22 is tackled before June. “Turkey is the bridge between the West and the Muslim world”, he declared. The country could play an important role here. Mr. Asselborn thanked Mr. Bagis that his country supported Luxembourg actively for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council and praised the fact that the relations between Turkey and Israel clearly improved.

■ Mr. Bagis, how interesting is still in fact EU accession nowadays for Turkey and for Europe itself?

EU accession is still very interesting for Turkey, because we never considered the EU as an economic or political union. For us, it is the biggest peace project of humanity. If nations such as France and Great Britain, which fought each other over hundreds of years can get together under the umbrella of the European Union, then Turkey should also participate. Turkey is in fact the most easterly part of the West and the most westerly part of the East. It could contribute to make of this continental peace project a global project: Turkey will help the EU to spread its values such as peace, democracy, solidarity and discipline. The process of the accession negotiations is even more important as the final result though.

■ In what sense?

The accession negotiations have helped Turkey to become a more democratic, confident and transparent country. We have made great progress in the area of food safety, regional development, education, etc. The EU is like a dietician: It has a good plan, namely the “Acquis communautaire”. We all know that we have to take care of our nutrition, if we want to live healthy. But we are rather lazy, if we have to do this on our own. Only when a dietician gives us a detailed plan about how much we can eat of what and when, then we do it. And even if the dietician is maybe a little overweight and moody, this does not change the fact that he still has the best plan that exists. The membership negotiations were very difficult until now, but I think that the atmosphere is just changing now.

■ Why do you think so?

Because there is a new head at the Elysée Palace. The gentleman, who tried to block the EU-efforts of Turkey (Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, editor’s note), was not reelected. President Hollande has understood that it does not serve the economy or the international relations of France to block the membership negotiations with Turkey. Chancellor Merkel never blocked the negotiations, but she had different ideas about the final result. Now she has understood, that it is important to have good relations with Turkey. The mentality is just changing. People become aware that Turkey is an important partner in the areas of commerce, energy, security and above all, international peace.

■ Does this mean that Turkey is not turning away from the EU, as it is often claimed?

Turkey has always been a bridge between Europe and Asia, between the West and the East, the North and the South, raw materials and industry, energy resources and demand. Every bridge has to stand on four strong pillars. The fact that we strengthen our relations with countries in the North, in the East or in the South, does not mean necessarily that we have to abandon our relations with the West. We can walk and at the same time chew gum. Turkey has always been a part of Europe. Our EU-efforts continue since 1959. We have waited 45 years to get a date for the opening of the membership negotiations. We did not give up. This shows how determined we are. However, if opportunities arise in other parts of the world, we naturally perceive them.

■ How could this also be useful for the EU?

There are many European Heads of State and Government who can visit an Islamic country to talk there about secular democracy. Likewise, there are many Muslim Heads of State and Government who talk in the same countries about Islamic cooperation and can attend the Friday prayers in a mosque. There are only a few though, like our Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who can do both. He can show these countries not to fear secular democracy.

■ Why do you think the lengthy visa-problem has still not been solved yet?

Because of prejudices against our citizens. The Turks are the only citizens of an EU candidate country, who need a visa for the Schengen area. Once the prejudices can be set aside, this problem will be solved.

■ Do you see in the election of Nikos Anastasiades as the new Cypriot President the possibility to finally come closer to the solution of the Cypriot conflict?

The solution of the Cyprus conflict was not a condition for the EU accession of Nicosia and it should in no way be a condition for Turkey. It should be regulated independently and it should not be an obstacle for the membership of Turkey. I am confident though, because we have for the first time in the South of Cyprus a President who supports the Annan plan and the reunification of the island. Therefore, I hope that President Anastasiades will take the necessary steps to put the differences of his country with those of his northern neighbour aside. We encourage both sides in Cyprus to find together a solution for the problem. They are the spouses, Great-Britain, Greece and Turkey are only the parents-in-law, who try to save their marriage. Both sides of Cyprus must decide as responsible adults though, if they want that their marriage should work or not. Whatever their decision is, we will respect it.

■ The train route Bettembourg-Triest-Istanbul connects the freight traffic between Luxembourg and Turkey in the logistics sector. From June onwards, flights of Turkish Airlines will take place between Luxembourg and Istanbul. How can both countries profit from one another and in which area the relations can still be developed?

I have noticed that most of the Europeans who visited Turkey once, are favorable to its membership in the European Union. This means the more people from Europe, and also from Luxembourg, travel to Turkey, the more support we get. I am pleased therefore that there will be soon direct flights between Luxembourg and Istanbul. I met the Minister of Economy Mr. Etienne Schneider today and we talked about partnerships in the areas of logistics, health, information and communication technologies. At the end of June, our

Economy Minister will come with a delegation to Luxembourg and at the end of the year Grand Duke Henri will visit Turkey with a number of investors and businessmen.