

EU-Turkey Relations: A Glimmer of Hope?

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Ties between the EU and Turkey have hit such lows over the past few years that even marginal improvements now almost carry a whiff of a breakthrough. As Cyprus takes up the Council presidency we are, rather paradoxically, on an upward trajectory.

The reason is fairly straightforward: it has to do with the arrival of François Hollande at the Elysée. Under Nicolas Sarkozy, France was the undisputed leader of the Turkey sceptics in Brussels; it unilaterally froze as many as five chapters in the accession talks with Ankara. Sarkozy captured the centre-right sentiment in France, Germany and elsewhere on the continent, by famously stating that Turkey was a great country, but not a European one. The volume of bad blood flowing between Paris and Ankara peaked last December when the French National Assembly passed a law criminalizing the denial of the 1915 Armenian genocide. What ensued was an outpour of anger in Turkey. Ankara threatened sanctions, though in reality it did little to act upon its threats, its hands tied by the commitments undertaken in the 1996 Customs Union with the EU. Such tensions explain why Turks applauded Hollande as he emerged victorious in the presidential race. The past months have seen frictions subsiding. Even without a single French veto lifted in the membership negotiations, official rhetoric has changed. France's socialist leader diplomatically points out that the question of whether Turkey joins the EU or not will not be solved within his term – and that, when the moment comes, it will be up to French citizens to decide in a referendum. Luckily for him, even prior to the presidential vote, the French Constitutional Court overruled the genocide criminalization act as infringing on the right of free speech. Hollande did promise to introduce fresh legislation on the Armenian issue in response to pressure from the 500,000 strong Armenian community, but has been vague on the details. In reality, the Constitutional Court's judgment provided both sides with cover to reach out

to one another. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's trip to Paris in July 2012 was cheered as a success, not least because of the meeting of minds over Syria.

The improvement in Franco-Turkish ties coincided with a push from Brussels to step up beleaguered EU-Turkey relations. On 17 May, Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle inaugurated in Ankara, together with Turkey's Europe Minister and Chief Negotiator Egemen Bağış, a "Positive Agenda". This new Commission initiative is meant to assist harmonization of Turkish legislation in policy-areas where negotiations are frozen. The Positive Agenda is essentially an institutional trick intended to circumvent the Cyprus issue, the paramount obstacle on Turkey's enlargement track. The Commission's entrepreneurship would not have been possible without critical support from the EU Council. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, one of the pro-membership voices in the Council, called on Turkey not to suspend ties with the Union during the six months of the Cypriot Council presidency. "We should be rational, not emotional. We should not miss our goal", he said. On 28 June, he co-wrote along with 15 EU foreign ministers (excluding Laurent Fabius of France, but predictably including all the usual suspects like UK, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the Central and East European countries) a joint op-ed calling for reigniting the accession process.

The positive momentum goes beyond symbolism. In July, Turkey and the EU initialled a readmission agreement, a long-standing demand from Brussels, given the scores of illegal migrants pouring daily into the Schengen area across the Turkish-Greek border. Turkey has been conditioning its acquiescence on an EU roadmap specifying steps and conditions towards the lifting of visas, as was done for the Western Balkans. Almost unnoticed, the EU Council took a crucial step forward on 21 June by mandating the Commission to kick off work on such a roadmap. Even Cyprus, which had formerly expressed reservations, supported the motion. A grand bargain in which Turkey strengthens its border controls, undertakes institutional

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reforms in line with the *acquis* and starts accepting the return of third-country nationals in exchange for visa-free travel is certainly a win-win scenario for both parties. For all its newly found confidence and assertions that it no longer needs the EU, Turkey is still a *demandeur* in the area of free movement of people. The Union has a collective interest in obtaining Ankara's cooperation on curbing illegal flows, but also in overhauling Turkish policies on borders, migration and asylum. Clearly this is an opportunity worth taking up, even if it will take years before the process is completed.

Where this upturn in bilateral relations will lead is far from certain however. At the very least, the chances for a major crisis under the Cyprus presidency are diminishing. Initialling the deal on readmission was also a positive step. But there are still several open questions to consider. Firstly, will Turkey embrace the conditionalities embedded in the roadmap once the Commission delivers on its commitments? Will it put its final signature on the readmission agreement, the text of which has been ready for quite some time? What sort of a deal will the EU offer Ankara via the roadmap? Secondly, how realistic is it to expect the EU to unfreeze some of the negotiation chapters? The prospects of Turkey making the first move and allowing Cypriot aircraft and ships into its ports are as negligible as ever. With the Eurozone crisis in full swing, the French leadership has plenty on its plate and is unlikely to unblock negotiation chapters, risking a right-wing backlash. The worst deadlock might be over, but the real breakthrough is not yet in sight. Much depends, no doubt, on the outcome of the general elections in Germany in 2013 and whether a prospective SPD-dominated coalition, in cooperation with Hollande, steers EU-Turkey relations in a positive direction.



This brings up the less than comfortable truth that Turkey and the EU have simply less time for one another these days. Turkey is concerned with issues like the political demands of the Kurdish community and the civil war in neighbouring Syria, on which the EU is of little relevance (unlike individual member states, of course). The EU, for its part, faces the most profound and debilitating challenge to its existence since the inception of European integration in the 1950s. Enlargement is not a top agenda item, to put it mildly. Even without Cyprus stirring up trouble, it will take a lot to restart EU-Turkey relations and recover at least some of the upbeat mood of the mid-2000s.