

The EU bows to German pressure to delay Turkey's membership talks

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The EU averted a possible derailment of embattled Turkey's moribund accession negotiations by agreeing to open the first chapter in three years, but not this month as originally promised because of Ankara's excessively brutal handling of the demonstrations which have rocked the country and particularly appalled Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor.¹ Failure to have opened the chapter –on regional policy– could well have led the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an abrasive figure, to pull the plug on the negotiations.



The protests began peacefully over the development of Gezi Park, a rare green space near Taksim Square in the heart of Istanbul, and spread to 72 of Turkey's 82 provinces after the police used excessive force to dislodge them and sparked a wave of demonstrations against Erdogan's increasing authoritarianism and creeping Islamisation which has polarised the country. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power since 2002 and has won an increasing share of the vote (almost 50% in 2011) on a rising voter turnout.

EU countries, particularly Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, were keen to fire a warning shot across the bows of Ankara while at the same time keeping Turkey, a strategically important country and NATO stalwart, on board. The EU wants to encourage Turkish society without rewarding the government.

Chapter 22, at Germany's proposal, will be opened after the presentation of the European Commission's annual progress report in October unless there is a further setback. France had earlier in the year cleared the way for this chapter after softening its opposition to Turkish entry into the EU.

Germany's hard stance should be seen within the context of the country's upcoming elections and the substantial size of the Turkish community in Germany (an estimated 3 million). Merkel's Christian Democratic Party opposes Turkey's full EU membership and proposes a looser association.

The last EU report highlighted serious concerns about democracy and human rights in a country that began its accession process in October 2005 and has only closed one of the 35 chapters (on science and research) of the *acquis communautaire*, the rules that prospective new members must adopt. Around half of the chapters are either blocked because of French and Cypriot objections or frozen by Brussels because of Ankara's failure to implement the

¹See

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/commentary-chislett-indignants-turkey.

2005 Ankara Protocol and open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic and hence extend its customs union with the EU (since 1996) and recognise the Republic of Cyprus, an EU country since 2004. Turkey has occupied the northern part of Cyprus since invading the country in 2004.

The last chapter of the 13 now opened –on food safety and veterinary standards– was during Spain’s Presidency of the EU. Spain has a burgeoning trade and investment relation with Turkey and both Socialist and Popular Party governments have been among the strongest supporters of Turkey’s EU membership. Both are also in favour of Turkey being included in the EU-US free trade agreement that is currently on the table.² Turkey is Spain’s second-largest non-EU export market.

‘While we have been disturbed by the reaction to the recent peaceful protests in Turkey, I believe that the EU accession process is the most effective tool we have in influencing the reform agenda in Turkey’, said the Irish Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore. Ireland currently holds the EU Presidency. ‘EU-inspired reforms have facilitated the increasing space for peaceful protest and dissenting voices’.

‘The protests have also shown that Turkey needs further reform. Moving ahead with the EU accession process by opening Chapter 22 will, I believe, allow the EU to continue contributing to shaping the direction of future reform in Turkey’.

The European Commission will be expecting a more conciliatory approach towards the demonstrators than that showed so far. A defiant Erdogan said last week the protests were linked to terrorism, an international plot against Turkey and an ‘interest rate lobby’. His Minister for EU Affairs, Egemon Bagis, said last week that anyone who entered Taksim Square would be treated as a terrorist as opposed to someone exercising their rights if done peacefully.

A full-blown crisis in EU-Turkey relations was in no one’s interest. The EU is Turkey’s main trading partner and by far the largest source of direct foreign investment. It has NATO’s second-largest army after the US and under Erdogan the country has been viewed as a ‘model’ –for Arab countries in its turbulent backyard– for accommodating secularism, democracy and political Islam and combining it with a vibrant market-based economy. This model has been seriously tarnished by the government’s heavy-handed approach to the protests and lack of meaningful dialogue.

President Barack Obama has so far stayed on the sidelines of Turkey’s crisis, at least publicly, unlike Merkel, but earlier this week, before the EU’s compromise deal, he had a phone conversation with Erdogan. According to a White House statement Obama discussed the ‘importance of non-violence and of the rights to free expression and assembly and a free press’, all of whose shortcomings have been woefully exposed in the last few weeks. This was apparently the first time the White House publicly had raised such issues and is a measure of the concern in Washington that Turkey’s situation calms down and is not further inflamed.

² See

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari2-2013_chislett_turkey_spain_trade_investment.



Brussels will be keeping a close eye on Erdogan in the coming months to see whether he changes his majoritarian concept of democracy, a trait also common to Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister and previously to the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, who died this year, and shows more willingness to listen to voices other than those within his own party and gives more space to his opponents. It is also an opportunity for the weak opposition parties, particularly the Republican People's Party, a pillar of the previous status quo, to become more effective.

It is to be hoped that the way forward for the AKP does not include the views of Aziz Babuscu, the chairman of the party's Istanbul organisation. He openly said in April that the AKP was parting ways with Turkey's liberals. They were attracted to the Islamic-rooted party when it burst on the scene in 2002 because of its pro-EU stance and willingness to change parts of the rigid Kemalist state (named after Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey in 1923), including the military, whose influence and power have been reduced.

Babuscu said: 'Those with whom we were stakeholders throughout the past 10 years will not be our stakeholders in the coming decade... Let us say the liberals, in one way or another, were stakeholders in this process, but the future is a process of construction. This construction era will not be as they [liberals] wish. Hence, they [liberals] will no longer be with us... The Turkey that we will construct, the future that we will bring about, is not going to be a future that they will be able to accept'.³

It is up to Erdogan to prove his critics wrong.

³ Cited by Suat Kiniklioglu in *Today's Zaman* newspaper on 6 June 2013. Kiniklioglu was an AKP member of parliament until 2011 when liberal MPs were purged from its ranks. See <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-317576-democrats-liberals-and-the-ak-party.html>.