

Progress Report on Turkey - Problems and Prospects

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The Turkish political elite and the public in general were long waiting for the Progress Report of the Commission to see how far the political reforms undertaken in the country have brought them closer to starting the accession negotiations with the EU. Although this report was not considered as crucial as the one which will be issued in autumn 2004 on the basis of which the Council will take the decision to open accession negotiations, it was perceived as an interim report which would signal the most crucial steps that are expected from the Turkish government in the period leading up to the critical December Summit of 2004.

The Report, in general, has a more positive tone than the previous ones with a special emphasis on the progress achieved in the field of democracy and human rights. The establishment of the "Reform Monitoring Committee", the government's approach of "zero tolerance to torture", the reforms regarding the structure of the National Security Council and military-civilian relations, the abolition of the state of emergency in the South East and the positive developments in Greek-Turkish relations are specifically praised by the Commission.

However, the Report also has a long list of shortcomings regarding the political criteria. Implementation of the recent reforms is cited as the most important stumbling block in fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria, especially with respect to broadcasting in languages other than Turkish and the acquisition of property by the foundations of religious minorities. Regarding civilian-military relations, the Report criticises the continuing influence of military on politics and the problems encountered in civilian control of military spending. With respect to human rights and the protection of minorities, problems pertaining to the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights decisions; impediments in the fight against torture; the state of prisons; limitations on the freedom of expression; legal bans on the training of the clergy of the religious minorities; problems in the granting of the right to fair trial and remaining restrictive provisions on the right to set up associations are highlighted as areas that need specific action in the coming year. Thus the Report concludes, on the basis of the political situation in the country, that Turkey does not yet fully comply with the Copenhagen political criteria.

Regarding the economic dimension of accession, the Report seems to be more positive. Despite problems relating to macroeconomic stability, high interest rates, high budget deficit, privatisation and intellectual property rights, the Report states that Turkey has come a long way in becoming a fully functioning market economy, in decreasing its inflation levels and in shifting from an agriculture based economy to one providing services. Acquis harmonisation, which provides the third pillar of the Copenhagen criteria, is considered as the area where the least amount of progress is observed, especially with respect to the establishment of the institutional structures required for implementation of the reforms.

These observations did not surprise many in Turkey, who were expecting a Report along these lines. There were some reactions over the Commission's request to lift the ban on the use of Kurdish letters that are not present in the Turkish alphabet-q, w and x-in names registered by Turkish citizens; but this debate was surpassed by a larger scale discussion on Cyprus, fuelled by the Commission statements in the Strategy Paper. By claiming that "the absence of a settlement could become a serious obstacle to Turkey's EU aspirations", the Commission has,

for the first time, established a direct formal link between Turkey's membership to the European Union and the resolution of the Cyprus issue. The Turkish government has reacted on the grounds that the Cyprus issue can not be made a part of the Copenhagen criteria; but was further disappointed by the following statements of Verheugen affirming the linkage between the accession process and the Cyprus issue and declaring that it was a deliberate move on the part of the Commission to accelerate the resolution of the conflict.

It needs to be acknowledged that, regardless of the Commission's direct reference as such, the link with Cyprus has been there for a long time as one of the major hurdles on Turkey's path to EU integration. The fact that a formal linkage is now stated in writing does little to change the reality that the Greek Cypriots will, by May 2004, already be in a position to veto EU decisions on Turkey in the case that no solution is reached on the island. The fact that Turkey is unwilling to push for any concessions in Cyprus without a firm commitment from the EU regarding the opening of accession negotiations, and that the EU yet remains hesitant in giving such a clear signal to Turkey, makes any solution even more complicated and difficult to attain. In the absence of a concrete sign from the EU, which seems rather unlikely for the time being as implementation of reforms remains to be seen, Turkish politicians would perceive it highly risky to make any compromises in resolving the problem. However, the possibility of an electoral victory of the opposition forces in the upcoming elections in the Northern Cyprus signals that hope still remains for a settlement of the dispute. Such an election outcome could be vital in the shifting of balances of power within Cyprus as well as within Turkey.

As is also evident from the Progress Report, the determining factors in Turkey-EU relations for the year 2004 will prove to be the implementation of political reforms and the resolution of the Cyprus problem. The government's determination to focus on implementation in 2004 may indeed help eliminate an important impediment on Turkey's path to Europe. However the Cyprus hurdle may prove a more difficult one to overcome. While all sides to the conflict are now awaiting the results of the 14th December elections, EU has a specific responsibility to facilitate such a solution. The Union needs to use its remaining leverage on the Greek Cypriots to keep the Annan Plan alive in the case of a possible renegotiation after the elections, while at the same time giving a clear signal to Turkey that, on condition that the political reforms are implemented, accession negotiations will be initiated in early 2005. This would not only ease the solution of the problem which seems to constitute an additional Copenhagen criteria for Turkey, but also help to strengthen the belief that the Union is serious about the country's future accession. The recent terrorist attacks in Istanbul underline how a Europeanising Turkey can be such an important bulwark against the Islamic fundamentalists who, via terror, express their discontent with the further Westernisation of the country. The EU's role as an anchor should now be more pronounced than ever, not just to ensure the continuation of the reforms in the country but also to strengthen the fight against radical Islam.

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