

The European Parliament and the Accession of Turkey to the European Union

With the signing of the accession partnership at the Nice Summit on 7 December 2000 the approximation process between Turkey and the EU reached a new phase. Turkey and its status is an important issue for many members of the European Parliament (EP). It should be kept in mind that the EP is an important forum in the debate of Turkey's membership to the EU. Yet there are diverging views among the members of the EP on Turkey's membership. The conservatives are rather sceptical of the prospect of Turkish accession. The Convention is a great opportunity for Turkey for contributing to the discussions in a constructive manner and to enrich the discourse.

With the signing of the Accession partnership at the Nice Summit on 7 December 2000 the approximation process between Turkey and the EU reached a new phase. Therewith Turkey committed itself to realising fundamental reforms, reforms of approximation and adaptation to the EU, for these are the precondition for full membership.

The pre history/past was not always fortunate

In 1987 Turkey had already applied officially for full membership, which was subsequently rejected by the EC Council in 1990. The Council justified its decision with the argument that, in the wake of the realisation of the Single Market, the Union was not capable of opening further Enlargement negotiations. This rejection was naturally very disappointing for Turkey.

Further unease to the Turkish side was caused when the payment of previously promised Financial support by the EC was not granted. In particular, the veto of Greece was perceived as yet another *affront* .

Nevertheless the rapprochement continued. The Customs Union long sought for since 1990 was formed into an agreement in 1995, entering into effect in 1996. Despite these achievements Turkey was "quasi" excluded from the Enlargement process, as Turkey was not granted the status of a 'candidate' to accession.

The Luxembourg Summit symbolised a crisis in the relations between the EU and Turkey. The changes in Eastern Europe had created new conditions, which fundamentally influenced the future structure and the future of the Union; therefore, the negotiations with Turkey on the political agenda were dropped to the lowest position. As a result of this unequal treatment the political leadership in Turkey decided to interrupt the political dialogue with the EU. Turkey pursued this position so vigorously and determinedly that it did not even accept the special status offered.

In order to improve the relations between Turkey and the EU, the Commission prepared a "European Strategy for Turkey", which aimed particularly at the intensification in diverse Economic sectors.

In 1999 the negotiations were set in motion as again Turkey was granted candidate status and an EU-euphoria broke out. Large sectors of Turkish society were captured by this spirit. Just two years before, at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997, candidate status had been denied.

A lively discussion was led about when the desired full membership could be reached and which reforms needed to be carried out in order to bring Turkey closer to EU-standards. However the journey to this goal is more difficult than some continue to perceive it.

Nonetheless, one could argue that the perspective of Accession has strengthened the willingness to reform the government. In 2000 Turkey signed two UN-Agreements concerning civil and political rights and another on economic as well as on social and cultural rights. These are milestones towards more democracy and freedom.

Reforms on the road towards greater democracy

In March 2001 the “National Programme” was introduced as a substantial reform package. Commissioner Günter Verheugen defined this programme as “the most important first step” in the preparations of Turkey for the future Accession Negotiations to the EU. However, at the same time he also asked Turkey for more efforts in this process.

The most recent reform package has finally taken missing demands into consideration:

- The abolition of the death penalty, with the reservation of war situations.
- The protection of cultural rights of minorities. In this respect the linguistic emancipation in the media is included.
- A fundamental reform of the political institutions and of the justice department as well as the police force.

These complements were urgently necessary.

The National Programme was an expression of the existing pressure for reforms, which has pervaded the Turkish economy. It has surely also been an expression of a breakthrough in the social demand for reforms.

With this a new swing has been brought into the discussion on reform approximation with the EU.

The Approximation/Integration of Turkey to the EU is in a new phase

During the EU summit in Nice the agreement concerning the Accession partnership with Turkey was signed. In this Accession Partnership all points which Turkey has to fulfil in order to get close to the EU norms in the coming years are listed. These include the so-called “Copenhagen” political, as well as economic criteria.

This pre-accession process is a concrete point of action. How should this approximation process develop and what should we expect in the current situation?

There are still certain dangers in this process, especially because the economic situation has not improved since 2001.

Although in the last years far-reaching inequalities in the economy have been reduced and a substantial part of the economy is already able keep up with the competitive pressure of the EU, there are still huge differences in the income level and the ratio of rich and poor in Turkey.

On the one hand, Turkish daily politics is marked by corruption, scandals in the banking sector, and economic bottlenecks. On the other hand, the reform and renewal process is being continued. The cause for the development of this reform and renewal process is certainly the Accession Partnership signed at the summit in Nice, while the pre-accession strategy of the EU furthers this process.

The result of the current reforms is also largely due to the new confidence that the Turkish parliament has vis a vis the EU. The Turkish Parliament has realised that the EU is serious about Turkey's candidacy.

The EU welcomes the recent reforms

After a marathon session on 2 August the Turkish Parliament adopted a far-reaching reform package which should eventually pave the way of Turkey into the EU. The abolition of the death penalty in times of peace, the permission of minority languages, including Kurdish, and the liberalisation of the right to demonstrate are significant points of this package.

Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit believes that with this reform package the criteria for an accession are fulfilled. He is of the view that Turkey has herewith fulfilled all its political obligations for accession.

It is true that huge obstacles have been removed on the way to the EU. Nevertheless, Turkey neither stands on the doorstep of the EU, nor is the door to the EU now wide open. The changes in the law through the party representatives are just one aspect of the obligations.

The representatives of the EU-Commission and the European Parliament had already underlined this and pointed out that the implementation of the liberal laws were herewith not to be taken for granted. Opponents could already refer to side clauses of the new laws. For instance, the education in Kurdish language must "be in compliance with the Constitution". This can be problematic. The interpretation of the laws will be watched very carefully by the Commission. Also, the position of the Military still does not satisfy EU criteria.

These reforms already have opponents: The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has already placed itself at the head of the reform opponents and has voted unanimously against the reform package. In addition, the party leader, Mr. Bahçeli, will apply to the Constitutional Court in order to prevent these reforms. Moreover, according to opinion polls MHP has a chance of being one of the strongest party groups in Parliament after the early elections which will take place in November.

The decision as to whether Turkey really connects with the EU will, therefore, be determined on 3 November. A lot can happen until then..

However, the European Union has viewed the reforms very positively. For the EU Commission the changes in laws are an important signal that the majority of the Turkish leadership is determined to approach the values and yardsticks of the EU.

Following the abolition of the death penalty, Commissioner Verheugen said, "*Turkey is from now on undoubtedly on our side.*" The president of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, also honoured it as "*the significant progress in the framework of the candidacy of Turkey to the EU*". This first reaction surely reflects the wholehearted wishes by the majority of the Parliamentarians.

The European Parliament debates free and open

Turkey and its status is an important issue for many MEP's: No one should forget that the EP is an important forum in the debate of Turkey becoming a member of the EU and plays a vital role in this process.

We in the permanent Turkey–EU delegation feel our position reconfirmed. Turkey is an important partner, and we, from the side of the European Parliament, have always pushed for reforms in Turkey so that the accession negotiations can progress. Through our activities and through the current reforms more and more arguments of the sceptics in the EU and in Turkey are being erased. We are on the right track.

On one hand, the EP voted unequivocally in favour of Turkey: On 13 December 1995 the European Parliament had to decide on the ratification of the Customs Union agreement with Turkey. Despite the ongoing human rights violations in Turkey, the democratic deficit, and the conflict with the Kurds, as well as the role of the Military, and the lack of the rule of law, the EP decided by majority vote in favour of the Customs Union agreement. On the other hand, the human rights situation of the country was afterwards frequently the subject of critical resolutions in the EP. Also the last report of the Commission about progress of Turkey on the way to accession into 2000 highlighted many points which need to be improved. In aspects of its development Turkey lags behind, though not in others.

The evaluation in the EP by Alain Lamassoure triggered a substantial echo in the media, especially in Turkey. However, the parliament must live up to its task of furthering democratic developments and pointing out a lack of development. Here there are differences between the different political groups. The conservatives in the EP are rather sceptical of the prospect of Turkish accession. In particular, they consider cultural differences and geographic aspects decisive, to the detriment of Turkey. In spite of the high proportion of Turks living in the Union, “in particular in Germany”, they are of the opinion that accession is not in Europe's best interest.

Culturally Turkey is not considered by them a part of Europe, despite the association agreement which enshrines an accession perspective. The mutation of the EC of 1963 to the EU of 2002 is advanced to support this argument. The conservatives in the EP hold the view that the Union of today is of such different character that the original perspective was granted according to completely different premises, which do not exist today. The economic cooperation of the EC has moved to the background in favour of the aspect of a community of values. For this reason, members of the EPP wanted to prevent the participation of Turkey in the Convention. Markus Ferber, the chairman of the CSU delegation in the European Parliament, explicitly rejected equal treatment of Turkey with the other 12 candidate countries. He rejected this “as Turkey from a human rights point of view is not ready for Enlargement”. Given that accession negotiations had not yet opened, Turkey would have no right to take part in the Convention. He called it a mistake that the EU Heads of States and Governments had agreed to give Turkey candidate status at the EU summit in Helsinki. Turkey had been given a hope which could never be fulfilled. It is true that the European People's Party argues against human rights violations and problems in the judicial system; however, it is the cultural aspect, and also since September 11 the religious background, which is at the centre of the argument. The Social Democrats have declared explicitly that they appreciate the reforms in Turkey and the determination for approximation to the Union. It is clear, however, that the Cyprus question can not be excluded. This point is crucial for

Turkey's accession. Of course, the implementation of legal reforms and the real dealing with minorities in the future is a decisive issue. We advocate not giving any promises to Turkey which we can not keep later. One thing is important: We want an open and honest debate on the accession of Turkey to the Union.

Let us be honest. The first round of enlargement will be a heavy burden for the Union and will probably lead it to the limits of its capacity. This is one reason for the need of the Convention and for an institutional reform and deepening of the Union even before Enlargement. Here the member states of the Union find their homework. But even if the planned time-table for the Convention and Enlargement is kept, even if Copenhagen is a lasting success, it will take quite a while until a second round of Enlargement comes near.

The intermission needs to be used intelligently by both the candidate countries and the Union. Now Turkey needs to show its colours.

The Convention is a great opportunity for this. If Turkey is able to contribute in this discussion in a self-assured and constructive manner and to enrich the discourse, then it will have gained a lot. For it is evident that the members of this forum will firstly take a good look at the conduct of the accession countries and secondly have a significant word to say regarding concrete accessions.

The Union has to utilise its experience with its previous steps of Enlargement, and Turkey has the possibility of accompanying this process as an observer and as an actor for its own benefit. That Turkey can do this within the Convention on an equal footing is thanks to the German Government, which has been one of its most active sponsors since the summit in Helsinki in 1999.

The new Turkey policy of the German government played a major role in the granting of candidate status for full membership at the Helsinki summit. Immediately after the change of Government in Bonn/Berlin in 1998 the new Government introduced a new policy towards Turkey. During the German Presidency in the first semester of 1999 the Government made special efforts to reduce the reservations of Greece vis-à-vis Turkey. This political line has been drawn by the Foreign Minister and the Chancellor and has been advocated in all discussions at the EU level and in many talks with representatives from a wide variety of countries. The enlargement process, however, is fraught with risks. It is a mistake to believe that now with the new package of reform Turkey has already overcome the greatest obstacle to full membership to the Union. Therefore, it is sensible for the EU to propose intermediate steps towards an EU accession to Turkey. An economic and political area similar to the European Economic Area in which the other candidate countries and others move in the direction of the EU would be such a possibility. However, this should not be to the detriment of the accession perspective. The Social Democratic parliamentarians advocate a discussion in this area.

The internal dynamic of Turkey

The internal dynamic of Turkey is very helpful with respect to the EP. Large parts of the Turkish Civil Society support the approximation process and push increasingly for reforms. These associations, societies, and groups play an important role in exerting pressure on political decision makers so that the reform process is driven further, as we currently see. In this sense there is no denying the significant influence of the economic actors on the reform projects.

Turkey is in a fundamental economic crisis; the parties know that further assistance depends on a positive signal on the adoption of the reform package. Therefore, Western orientation is important for the economy. The economic stability which investors demand is to be achieved with a reform package and 30 billion Euro in international credits. Also this factor leads to a step-by-step approximation.

The engagement of civil society and the economic cooperation are a good leverage for us in the EP. Via these organisations we can accompany the process of democratisation in Turkey. The contact between the Parliamentarians and such groups in Turkey is meanwhile stable and coined by mutual trust. Economic relations have tied Turkey to the EU for a long time. However, there are some hurdles which the Turkish political system itself has to clear. It has now begun with the new reform package.

The Cyprus problem contains opportunities

The most important question in Turkey is clarifying its relations with Greece and Cyprus. Turkish public opinion, too, is conscious of the fact that time works against Turkey. Because of her Greek chief negotiator Cyprus has substantially better chances for EU membership than Turkey. There is a need for immediate action: It is undeniable that the EU expects deeds not only in the reform of the judicial system and the administration. Significant progress needs to be achieved on the Cyprus question.

Here the EU pre-accession strategy for Turkey helps. Nevertheless, the ball is now in Turkey's court. Only Turkey can give the push to solve this issue in a peaceful and lasting manner.

It is up to the EU to act with the necessary sensibility. In the EP we know this and we Social Democrats take this into account. Nobody has the intention of using this issue against Turkey.

On one issue we have to be clear. Wrong signals can strengthen the "orientalists" in Turkey. This would make the country unreliable, which is not a desirable aim. Nevertheless, this is a point which the Copenhagen Criteria expresses clearly and one which will be our guideline for further developments on the way into the Union.

The prospects are concrete and in the long term good

The EU-Commission is preparing another report on the current state of developments in the candidate states. At the Copenhagen Summit at the end of December the decision will be made as to which country can join. It is therefore possible that concrete offers to Turkey can be proposed. Much depends on the practical implementation of the Reform package, which will be followed by the Commission with great attention.

Turkey is a firm issue in the consideration of the future of the EU. Whether this will be in the form of full membership or in another form, the coming months will definitely be of importance.

These comments all sound optimistic, but we must be clear: The way to full membership is long. We must see this fact, if we want to create realistic options in order to protect both sides from disappointment.

