

From the Desk of the Editor

In this issue, TPQ takes stock of Turkey's EU accession process and addresses several key questions about Turkey's pro-active role in neighboring regions: is the regional role Turkey aspires to complementary or contradictory to the country's EU vocation, is it motivated by vision or frustration, and how can it most effectively support the long term goals articulated by Ankara? We are delighted to embark on this discussion with the two leading authorities on these issues today: Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who has set into motion the current foreign policy paradigms of Turkey, and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, who has held the EU Presidency for the past six months. The global context, nuts and bolts, and opinions –ranging from skepticism to upbeat optimism– follow from the pen of authors of various backgrounds.

While enthusiasts of Turkey's EU accession process complain that the pace of reforms has slowed, many in Turkey are disheartened by both the political and technical obstacles coming out of Europe. To date, out of the total of 35 chapters, 12 chapters of the EU *acquis communautaire* (the body of EU legislation which candidate countries must adopt) have been opened for negotiation – the most recent (on the environment), on 21 December 2009. The Cyprus deadlock is one significant blockage and the ongoing talks between the leaders of the two communities are critical. Even though, there have been steps taken in 2009 by Turkey –both on the technical track and the political– deep-running domestic confrontations and pressing regional developments have all contributed to distracting Turkey from its EU agenda.

In recent months, Turkey has been commended widely for some of its initiatives in the region, however there has also been discord between Ankara and Western counterparts over, for example, approaches to the possibility of Iran pursuing nuclear weapons and dealings with the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, charged by the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Darfur.

In the Caucasus too it has been an intense season. The two protocols signed by Turkey and Armenia on October 10th are on “stand by” in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Parliament. The agitation these protocols created in Azerbaijan was exacerbated by scenes from the football match in Bursa between Turkey and Armenia on October 14th at which Azerbaijan's flags were banned

from the stadium. Azerbaijan retaliated by removing Turkish flags in various locations in Baku. Also significant was the reaction from the people in both countries – with even supporters of the Turkish–Armenian rapprochement objecting to the restriction of the Azerbaijan flag (which was symbolic of a display of dissent), and notable individuals in Azerbaijan hanging the Turkish flag from their windows as a reaction to their administrations’ decision. Though the tone has mellowed in both capitals with Turkey’s reiteration that the protocols will not be ratified until the “occupation of Azerbaijan ends”, a bitterness and suspicion remains. Although it can be argued that Turkey has increased the stakes of a solution to the Karabagh conflict through reshuffling the cards, having raised expectations may also come at a price.

Resentment is also growing in Armenia, where linkage between the Karabagh resolution process and the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia elicits strong domestic opposition. Absent opening of borders, there are many steps Turkey can take to demonstrate its sincerity in seeking rapprochement with Armenians – such as introducing new paradigms in the approach to the rights of the Armenian minority in Turkey and commemorating the Armenian presence in Anatolia prior to 1915. Such steps could also contribute to the wide-ranging effort in Turkey to clear remaining hurdles to democratization and liberalization.

Turkey’s low-profile in the debate of domestic transformation in neighboring countries –democratization, freedoms, governance, distribution of resources– is notable. Arguably, Turkey’s own progress may “rub off” on its neighbors through increased trade and liberalized visa regimes, with Turkey’s “Europeanization” making this prospect all the more likely. Does, however, Turkey’s focus on maximizing collaboration with the leadership of neighboring states, regardless of the legitimacy or values of their ruling elites, prevent it from contributing to the rights and well-being of the people of these countries? At a time when the transatlantic community itself is “soul-searching” about its track record in trying to bring about change in troubled regions, whether Turkey’s strategies and style of reaching out in the neighborhood will yield more effective results is an open question that will be discussed intensely in the months and years ahead.

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Diba Nigar Göksel
