

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, TURKEY AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Michalis Attalides, Rector, University of Nicosia

Every end of year the European Commission publishes a series of reports on the enlargement process of the European Union. These reports do not necessarily reflect the view of the European Union as a whole. In the coming months, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers will discuss these reports and come to conclusions accommodating divergent views. But the reports of the Commission form an important basis on which discussions will be conducted and conclusions drawn. The reports are not easy to read as they run into hundreds of pages, and some find their low-key, bureaucratic tone exasperating in view of the Turkish government's recent bellicose statements and actions in the eastern Mediterranean. It is worth however asking and estimating what the Commission has contributed to reflection on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

There are two documents relevant to Turkey. One is the Commission staff working paper entitled "Turkey 2011 Progress Report", which is a document designed to reflect the course of policy alignment under each of the 33 chapters of the "acquis" for each of the candidate countries, and also their degree of current conformity with the "Copenhagen" political and economic criteria for eligibility for accession. The second is a policy document which is entitled "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2011-12", which encompasses all the candidate countries under policy oriented headings such as "progress in the enlargement countries and key challenges for 2011-12" and "Conclusions and Recommendations."

Clearly the Commission considers that Turkey is crucial for the interests of the European Union. "With its dynamic economy, important regional role and its contribution to the EU's foreign policy and energy security, Turkey is a key country for the security and prosperity of the European Union ... the Country has become an important industrial platform for a number of leading European companies, and is therefore a valuable component of Europe's competitiveness."¹

It is a cause of great concern for the Commission that "...it has regrettably not been possible to open a new negotiating chapter for over a year."² This concern is particularly emphatic in view of the fact that it is repeated more than once that the accession

¹ Enlargement Strategy p.18

² Ibid. p.3

process is the “most effective framework” for promoting all those processes which the EU considers important in its relations with Turkey, such as promoting further internal reforms, developing a constructive dialogue on foreign and security policy related issues, and for diversifying Europe’s energy sources. Though it is correctly added that “an active and credible accession process”...”must respect the EU’s commitments and established conditionality”, the wish to rejuvenate Turkey’s accession process explains the understated nature of the Commissions reporting on Turkey’s recent activities tending to destabilization in the region. They are not mentioned at all in the Strategy document, but under the chapter “Foreign, Security and Defense Policy”, in the Progress Report, there are clear if sanitized allusions to Turkey’s neo-Ottoman initiatives. The document cites that Turkey has only aligned itself with one half of EU foreign and security policy declarations and decisions during the past year, did not align itself with restrictive measures imposed by the EU on Iran, Turkey’s relations with Israel have further deteriorated, and Turkey “eventually “ agreed to support NATO’s command of operations in Libya.³

Despite these observations, the Commission crucially argues that “As a stable country negotiating its accession to the EU, Turkey can play an important role in projecting stability and supporting reforms in its neighbourhood which is also the neighbourhood of the European Union”.⁴ Clearly the Commission is hoping for a positive balance of contribution by Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, and though it is not completely ignoring the disturbing aspects, it is clearly underplaying them, probably for the sake of maintaining and encouraging the Turkey accession process. As the Commission promises, “The Commission will work for a renewed positive agenda in EU-Turkey relations...”⁵ Perhaps not the least consideration is the possible fear that the Commission documents might give authoritative grounds for opposition to those governments who are against Turkish accession.

Of the political issues on which the Strategy paper concentrates, this is one of three topics which are at the centre of the report. The second one is the question of respect for human rights within Turkey, noting that “While substantial progress has been made over the past ten years, significant further efforts are required to guarantee fundamental rights in practice, in particular freedom of expression, women’s rights and freedom of religion.”⁶

Apart from a reference to “substantial number of formal complaints about violations of its territorial waters and airspace by Turkey made by Greece”, all the other references to political criteria are in relation to Cyprus.

³ Progress Report p.105-6

⁴ Enlargement Strategy p.18

⁵ Ibid p.25

⁶ Ibid p.18

Turkey is encouraged first of all to “increase in concrete terms its commitment and contribution” to the United Nations solution talks. This expresses a partial rejection of the “bystander” role which Turkey likes to take in relation to the Cyprus problem, by attributing all responsibility for a solution to “the two communities.” It is partial however because elsewhere in the Reports the Commission adopts the traditional position.

The threats of the Turkish government and military forces against Cyprus and its use of its Exclusive Economic Zone are referred to as “recent tensions between Turkey and Cyprus”. However there is no ambiguity about the Commission recalling that “... the Council has urged Turkey to refrain from any kind of threat, sources of friction or action, which could negatively affect good neighbourly relations and the peaceful settlement of border disputes. Furthermore, the EU has stressed all the sovereign rights of EU Member States which include entering in to bilateral agreements in accordance with the EU *acquis* and international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.”⁷

Finally, the Strategy report reiterates Turkey’s obligation to implement the provisions of its Association Agreement with the EU also to Cyprus, and to make so far non-existent progress to the normalization of bilateral relations with the Republic of Cyprus. “In the absence of progress the Commission recommends that the EU maintains its measures from 2006”.⁸ These measures are of course one of the reasons that no negotiating chapter was opened during the past year.

On the 16th October, four days after the publication of the reports in Brussels, the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Sweden held a common press conference after a meeting they had in Ankara. Ahmet Davutoglu at the press conference referred to his discussions with Carl Bildt and to “one of the biggest problems before Turkey’s European Union accession”, which surprisingly was not President Sarkozy’s opposition to Turkey’s membership, and the freezing of accession related negotiating chapters, which is the other reason for no chapters being opened last year. “One of the biggest problems before Turkey’s European Union accession,” which Minister Davutoglu referred to was “the Cyprus issue”.⁹

One can read too much into one statement at a press conference, even though the statement was selected for inclusion in the news item on the AKP party website. And there is somewhat of an irony in the statement. On the one hand the leverage considered in the past to be created for the solution of the Cyprus problem through Turkey’s EU accession process is considerably weakened by France’s and Germany’s

⁷ Enlargement Strategy p.25

⁸ Ibid p.26

⁹ Justice and Development Party webpage, “Turkish FM meets Swedish counterpart”, www.Akparti.org.tr/English/haberler/Turkish-fm-meeets-swedish-counterpart/14486, accessed 27th October, 2011.

current opposition, and by Turkey's new Middle East policies. On the other hand, Turkey itself has made the solution of the Cyprus problem a precondition for a number of other issues. Such issues are the extension of the EU Customs Union arrangements to Cyprus, the normalization of relations with the Republic of Cyprus, and most recently the recognition of Cyprus hydrocarbon exploration and extraction rights. These issues, as is the solution of the Cyprus problem itself, are some of the issues in the Eastern Mediterranean which are important for the European Commission, in relation of Turkey's progress towards EU accession.