

## MIXED SIGNALS FROM THE COMMISSION

In Brussels, officials are fond of saying that whatever squabbles there will inevitably be in the course of an applicant country's accession process, the EU Commission is always the applicant's best friend. But does that hold true for the Turkish negotiations, the only ones in the EU's history to be "open-ended" without a guarantee of full membership at the end?

Some Turks are beginning to have their doubts as a result of recent comments by the EU Commission President, José Manuel Barroso. Earlier this Autumn, the media quoted Mr Barroso as saying that the enlargement process should come to an end with Romania and Bulgaria. Later, his position was clarified to mean that further enlargement would have to await the creation of a European Constitution.

Now the Commission President has spoken again. Without specifying exactly what he had in mind, Mr Barroso told *Corriere della Sera* on 26 October that the Turkish accession process was "going very badly". "The reforms in Turkey are going very slowly and today I don't see the progress I would have hoped for". He added that he was worried about "a traumatic stop to negotiations".

### Disillusion in Turkey

In Turkey, Mr Barroso's words provoked a forceful response from the Turkish Foreign Ministry whose spokesman said that Mr Barroso's criticisms were unfair. He pointed to the completion of the screening process on 35 chapters and the forthcoming Ninth Reform Package about to go before the Turkish National Assembly. He also drew attention to sagging Turkish popular confidence in the EU. According to a recent poll, Turkish support for the EU has plummeted down to 32% in October from 67% in two years. Brussels, he said, also had to meet its commitments if the Turkish accession process is to succeed.

Turkish Foreign Ministry's perception of the success of the negotiations at a technical level is one shared in Brussels. For a country that is being told it cannot be admitted to the EU before 2015 or later, Turkey is already a long way down the road to membership. At a recent conference in Istanbul, present and former Brussels bureaucrats could be heard discussing the percentage of the *Acquis Communautaire* already embodied in Turkish law. Their guesses ranged between a low of 40% and a high of 80%. A member of the Enlargement Commissioner's cabinet concurred with the view that at the technical level the negotiations are going well, as technical talks between Ankara and Brussels always do. The problems are at the level of politics and public perceptions.

Against this background, Mr Barroso's remarks, however they are intended, sound perilously like hints to the media that he is on the side of the anti-Turkey forces in the EU.

### Constructive and friendly Troika

That is not true of the Commission as a whole. If Mr Barroso's comments have caused surprise and some alarm in Turkey, it is only fair to point out that rather more favourable messages have been coming from the EU Enlargement Commissioner, Mr Olli Rehn in the last few weeks. It was Mr Rehn who first referred to the

possibility of a 'train crash' in the Turkey-EU talks. But the EU-Turkey Troika in Brussels on 15 October was notable for its constructive and friendly atmosphere. Earlier in October Mr Rehn said that Turkey-EU relations had already gone well beyond the "privileged partnership" which some EU leaders want to see for Turkey and said such talk eroded the EU's credibility. On 29th October, he used an interview on Finnish TV to denounce national politicians in EU states who questioned Turkey's eligibility for membership, repeating that they were undermining both the EU's credibility and the reform process in Turkey. So the EU Commission seems to be sending out mixed messages on Turkey, little more than a week before it publishes its annual progress report which, because of the controversial Article 301 prosecutions in the summer, and the deadlock over Cyprus, is widely expected to be less favourable than its predecessors.

## Tail wagging the dog

Where Cyprus is concerned, the EU is wrestling with problems of its own creation stemming from its decision in 2004 to relax the Copenhagen Criteria for political stability and admit one side of a divided island the part that had voted against the UN-sponsored peace settlement to full membership. But there is a permanent unwillingness in Brussels to face this truth or to stop the Greek Cypriot tail wagging the EU dog, something which can only lead sooner or later to a disaster entirely disproportionate to the stakes directly involved.

Turkey's candidacy faces both real enemies and some sceptics. Yet Turkey is already much more prepared for EU membership than several earlier candidates, just as it is genuinely more European than many sceptics realise. And there is a set of genuine and deep underlying common interests, strategic, political, cultural, and economic between Turkey and the Union. Turkey is not a country in permanent contrast to Europe: it is part of the European system.

The underlying challenge both for Brussels and Ankara is to get those truths more widely understood and to allow them to drive the accession process. The Commission and friendly national government leaders other than Britain's Tony Blair should be doing more to raise consciousness of this. More EU and national government leaders could come to Turkey to see the country and its people themselves and do so regularly. Mr Barroso, who has yet to visit Turkey but was in Ukraine last week, could lead the way.

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