



FOR ANY 'GOOD' IN 2009, CYPRUS IS KEY, PERIOD

It was one of those meetings that you leave satisfied even if the subject is the gloomy state of affairs between Turkey and the European Union. In what looks like perfect cooperation, the Economic Policy and Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) and Sabancı University's Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), gathered some 50 people from diplomacy, academia, think tanks and the media in a series of intense sessions.

The December cold in Berlin helps keep you indoors, concentrating. Yet, it was largely agreed that the climate -- both in relations and in the city -- was the same. With the stalemate and the uncertainties it brought, there were many more questions than answers, even though some of the participants represented decision makers in Ankara.

The added ingredient in the gloom is, naturally, the economic crisis. In a speech that kept listeners on high alert, a prominent representative of the German banking sector warned that the consequences of the crisis would inevitably spill onto the political map of Europe, whose effects would be seen on the European Parliament elections next June. He simply alerted the audience about the radicalization fanning anti-EU, anti-immigration and xenophobic movements. Given the same type of effects, namely unemployment in Turkey, he predicted the current state of frozen relations would remain the same -- at best.

There were some other points that need to be highlighted:

· Paralysis in Turkish-EU relations since mid-2005 needs to be blamed not only on the Justice and Development Party (AKP) but also on others and can be traced to six factors: disappointment over the EU's Cyprus police following the rejection of a UN reunification plan by the Greek Cypriots in 2004, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) returning to violence from mid-2004, the verdict in the so-called Leyla Şahin case at the European Court of Human Rights, the formulation "open ended" in the process of EU accession negotiations, negative statements by France on where Turkey belongs and a need for a referendum on its full membership and the political calculations of the AKP to not pursue the EU cause because of a belief that the membership will never be attained.

· The European Parliament perceives developments (since the 2007 elections) in Turkey as mainly negative (with the only exception being regional diplomatic efforts and initiatives with neighbors) and with increasing concern. The majority that still supports Turkish accession is being weakened. The focus is now on human rights issues and the persecution of free speech, of freedom on the Internet and of freedom of assembly adds to growing dismay. Furthermore, the European Parliament is disturbed by honor killings, forced marriages (both in Turkey and Europe involving Turks and Kurds) and the current status of women.

· In Germany, negative news stories about "conservative pockets of isolated cultures" (in Berlin and elsewhere) were common but were lately replaced more and more by a "positive debate" about diversity of Turkish communities and Islam in general. This "evolution," however, was not "helped" by harsh debates about secularism and a closure case against the AKP. This shows that Turkey first has to reach domestic reconciliation to help create positive perceptions abroad.

· EU history is full of reconciliation stories such as French-German and Eastern-Western Europe. The EU has to come to the realization that it is only possible to reconcile with the Muslim world over the Bosphorus and Turkey.

· The AKP is still to be reckoned with as the sole "bearer" of the reform process, though its leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has as of late been sending mixed signals. There is a lull in the opposition, with neither the Republican People's Party (CHP) nor the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) displaying any willingness for a change of heart. There are strong rumors that the AKP will reignite the reforms soon after local elections, due in late March 2009.

· Much precious time has been wasted since the 2007 elections, leaving Turkey in deep rifts between the government and the opposition, the AKP and the military, the AKP and the judiciary, etc. In this developing "context of negative interaction," there are two external elements emerging as the promoters of change: The administration of US President-elect Barack Obama and Cyprus talks.

· For 2009, the Cyprus talks are key. They will help encourage Erdoğan to talk "constructively" with the EU and inspire new reforms in Turkey. Also, as one French diplomat put it: "If ended successfully, the Cyprus talks will leave France with no choice but to unblock five chapters." So, in order to prevent another "train crash" (resembling that of the 2004 referenda), the EU must work seriously to make it clear to Greek Cypriot leader Dimitris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat that they deliver -- for real and for good.

· Finally, the need for a new chief negotiator. There was a unanimous agreement that Turkey change the pattern and appoint a hardworking official who would devote his or her entire time to the negotiations and nothing else.