



For Turkey and the EU, Another Bend in the Road

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Nearly 18 months after the official launch of Turkey's membership negotiations, the EU agreed Wednesday (28 March) to open talks with Ankara on enterprise and industrial policy, the second out of 35 chapters a candidate country must complete to join the 27-nation union.

Turkey's chief negotiator with the EU, Ali Babacan, told reporters that the move is an "important indicator that Turkey's EU process is on track". The negotiations, which ran aground in December because of the dispute involving Cyprus, have "restarted in an appropriate way", Babacan said.

So far, Ankara and Brussels have completed talks on one chapter -- science and research. Under an EU decision taken in December 2006, eight other chapters -- free movement of goods, right of establishment and freedom to provide services, financial services, agriculture and rural development, fisheries, transport policy, customs union, and external relations -- remain frozen. The decision allows the remaining chapters to be opened, but none can be provisionally closed.

The EU wants Turkey to open its ports and airports to Cyprus, a member of the bloc. Before its accession talks started, in October 2006, the Turkish authorities signed a protocol extending the country's 1963 customs union agreement with the EU to all its new members, including Cyprus.

However, it also issued a declaration stating that this did not amount to recognition of the Greek Cypriot administration, with which it has no diplomatic relations. Since then, it has declined to provide Greek Cypriot vessels and planes access to its ports and airports, insisting that the EU must first make good on a pledge it made in 2004 to end the economic isolation of Turkish Cypriots in the north of the divided island.

The bloc's foreign ministers have since reiterated that pledge, and member states agreed in January to work towards opening direct trade links with the Turkish Cypriot community, whose breakaway republic is recognized only by Ankara.

The dispute over ports is not the only issue that has dogged Turkey's accession process so far. Another sticking point is a controversial penal code article that has opened the door for prosecutions of journalists and writers. Article 301 of the code makes it a crime to "insult Turkishness", and has been used to target scores of intellectuals, including Orhan Pamuk, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, and Hrant Dink, a prominent Turkish-Armenian editor. On January 19th of this year, Dink was assassinated by a young ultra nationalist.

"The prosecutions and convictions for the expression of non-violent opinion under certain provisions of the new penal code are a cause for serious concern and may contribute to create a climate of self-censorship in the country," the European Commission (EC) wrote in its latest report on Turkey's accession progress, issued in November 2006.

"This is particularly the case for Article 301 which penalises insulting Turkishness, the republic as well as the organs and institutions of the state. Although this article includes a provision that expression of thought intended to criticise should not constitute a crime, it has repeatedly been used to prosecute non violent opinions expressed by journalists, writers, publishers, academics and human rights activists," the EC said.

Turkey has indicated its readiness to amend the controversial legislation, rather than abolish it altogether as rights groups and officials in Brussels have suggested it should do. Since the country is in an election season -- with a presidential vote in May and a general election in November -- the climate may not be right for a substantial change in the law, political analysts warn.

The Article 301 controversy is one of several human rights issues about which the EU has raised concerns. Others include the treatment of minorities, particularly Kurds. Although Ankara has passed a number of sweeping reforms aimed at meeting the EU's political criteria for membership, critics say that implementation has been lagging and that onerous restrictions remain in force.

Despite the hurdles that have come up, officials in both Turkey and the EU continue to voice optimism about the accession process. Even as Brussels moved in December to partially freeze the talks, Turkish and EU officials sought to contain the impact.

"There has been no train crash -- the train is still firmly on track," British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, whose country is one of the

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strongest supporters of Turkey's EU membership bid, said after the December meeting. "Eight chapters have been suspended -- 27 out of 35 are not frozen, and there is every prospect that things will work steadily and effectively to make Turkey, in the fullness of time, a member of the EU."

Ankara, meanwhile, has stressed that is determined to continue down the path of reform. After the partial suspension, Turkish officials drew up their own reform plan, broken down into the 35 negotiating chapters, and based on the country's own priorities.

"If the goal is to reach European standards, then we will do it ourselves without the EU asking for it," Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul said at the time.

The programme, covering the period 2007-2013, is to be implemented before 2012. The last 24 months will be devoted to discussions on a date for Turkey's entry into the bloc, Babacan said during a European tour in March.

Turkey was officially recognised as an EU candidate country in 1999 -- 40 years after it first applied for associate membership of the European Economic Community, established in 1957 by six of today's 27 EU members. It was given a starting date for its accession talks in December 2004.

Prior to the start of the process, some member nations, such as Germany, suggested that Turkey should not be offered full membership, but only a "privileged partnership". Some nine months after the launch of the negotiations in October 2005, the first chapter in the talks was opened and provisionally closed in June of last year.

Turkey is now hoping to open three more chapters before the end of Germany's six-month presidency of the Union, which expires on June 30th.

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