



Turkey and the EU: Can stalemate be avoided?

By Katinka Barysch

★ Turkey's accession talks with the EU are heading for stalemate. With the bulk of the negotiations blocked by the EU and some of its member-states, there are only three chapters left for the EU and Turkey to start negotiations on. The Cyprus issue has become the main obstacle to unblocking Turkish accession talks.

★ It is conceivable that the political circumstances for Turkish accession might improve in a couple of years. However, the EU and Turkey would only be able to resume, and accelerate, the talks at a future point if two conditions were fulfilled in the meantime.

★ Turkey needs to continue to consolidate its democracy and reform its economy. Such progress would show the Europeans that the country is serious about meeting EU standards and it would leave Turkey well prepared to finish the accession negotiations.

★ The EU needs to find a way of broadening its relationship with Turkey beyond the narrow confines of the accession process. If the EU and Turkey managed to work together in foreign policy, crisis management or energy security, opposition to Turkish accession on both sides might weaken. Problems in the accession process would no longer threaten to derail EU-Turkey relations.

Five years after the EU and Turkey started accession negotiations, the process could be grinding to a halt. The negotiations have proceeded very slowly so far, and that has undermined their credibility and triggered much finger-pointing on both sides. But now deadlock looms – not because of a strategic decision by Europeans or Turks about the pros and cons of Turkish membership, but because of political posturing and short-sightedness in both Turkey and various EU member-states.

Turkey has started talks on 13 of the 35 'chapters' of EU law and policy that it needs to adopt ahead of accession. So far, Turkey has closed only one. In 2006 the EU decided that Turkey should not be allowed to close any more chapters unless and until it opens its ports and airports to ships and planes coming from Cyprus. The EU insists that this is Turkey's legal obligation under the so-called Ankara protocol through which Turkey agreed to extend its customs

union with the EU to all new member-states. Using the same reasoning, the EU has also blocked the opening of eight chapters that are broadly related to trade and the customs union.

Ankara maintains that it will not budge on the port-opening issue until the EU takes steps to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots, such as allowing them to trade freely with EU countries – a promise EU leaders made in 2004 when they admitted the Republic of Cyprus as a member even though the Greek Cypriots had voted down a plan for reunifying the island. Since it joined the EU, Cyprus has used its veto to prevent the EU from passing the so-called direct trade regulation needed to lift tariffs on Northern Cypriot goods.

Turks got their hopes up in the autumn of 2010, when the European Parliament examined whether it could use new powers gained under the Lisbon treaty

to overcome the impasse over the direct trade regulation. Had the Parliament decided that the regulation was a matter of international trade it could have voted on it and so put pressure on EU governments to move from unanimity to majority voting.¹ In October,

¹ *Nathalie Tocci, 'The baffling short-sightedness in the EU-Turkey-Cyprus triangle', Istituto Affari Internazionali, October 2010.*

however, after fierce lobbying from the Greek Cypriots, the judicial committee of the Parliament decided that unanimity was the right approach. The European Parliament may yet decide to take

up the issue again. But for now, the stalemate over Turkish ports and North Cypriot trade persists and not all European governments appear determined to resolve it. "Once the direct trade regulation is passed, the Northern Cypriots will no longer feel isolated and they will lose all interest in a settlement. It's better if we leave the regulation in the limbo of the European Parliament", says one diplomat from a big European country to excuse EU inaction.

When EU governments reviewed Turkey's compliance with the Ankara protocol in December 2009, they decided that eight blocked chapters were enough punishment for Turkish intransigence on the port issue. Cyprus disagreed and extended a unilateral veto that had hitherto affected two chapters to six chapters. In addition, the French government has been blocking the opening of five chapters. Since President Nicolas Sarkozy has argued that the EU should offer Turkey a privileged partnership instead of full membership, he has deemed talks on such issues as voting shares, the euro or the EU budget superfluous. Some of these blockages overlap, but in total 17 chapters are now off limits for Turkish and EU negotiators. That leaves only three chapters for Brussels and Ankara to make progress on.

These three chapters happen to be difficult ones: competition policy, employment and public procurement. Previous accession countries preferred to leave such delicate issues until the big prize of actual membership had moved within reach. But because so much of Turkey's accession process is frozen, Ankara has no choice but to deal with politically tricky chapters now.

To start talks on any of these chapters, Turkey first needs to comply with 'opening benchmarks' set by the EU. The measures required, such as extending trade union rights and making government tenders more open and transparent, would be politically tricky at the best of times. But with an election looming in Turkey in mid-2011, and many Turks questioning the whole purpose of the EU exercise, such reforms look harder still.

Assuming that it takes another year or so to open the remaining three chapters, the EU and Turkey will run out of new chapters to negotiate in 2012 at the latest – unless there is movement towards a settlement in Cyprus or the French president lifts his veto on the five chapters he currently blocks. Both look unlikely. Talks in Cyprus are stalled, and Sarkozy's fervent opposition to Turkish membership will not soften ahead of the French election in 2012. Both the EU and Turkey are acutely aware of the looming stalemate in the accession process. While diplomats have started quietly exploring ways of mitigating the risk of a break-down in relations, the public reaction on both the Turkish and the EU side has oscillated between smug complacency and angry recriminations.

The blame game

Some EU officials and politicians still insist that it is up to Turkey to keep the negotiations on track. They say that by implementing further reforms, Turkey could not just keep the negotiations moving forward; it could also create goodwill on the part of the Europeans, which may help to overcome political blockages.

Other EU officials go further. They know that opening the remaining three chapters would only postpone deadlock for another year or so. They therefore encourage the Turks to act unilaterally to open their ports to Cypriot ships, a move that would allow the EU to unblock the eight chapters that are currently suspended. They point out that it was Turkey's own decision to construct a link between the port opening issue and the direct trade regulation. Ankara, they argue, is free to change its mind. "Yesterday's linkages are not today's concern", says Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle.²

² *Speech at the Bosphorus conference in Istanbul, October 2010. Other quotes are from off-the-record interviews conducted the same month.*

But the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has painted itself into a corner by insisting vehemently and consistently that the ports would stay closed unless the EU fulfilled its promise on Northern Cypriot trade and transport. If the government opened the ports now, the opposition would accuse it of capitulating to the EU (or worse: the Greek Cypriots) and of selling out the interests of the citizens of Northern Cyprus. Acknowledging that Erdoğan is unlikely to take such political risks ahead of an election, some EU officials are searching for a face-saving compromise. Perhaps a 'gesture' from Turkey would be enough for the EU to lift the blockages on at least some of the eight chapters. Such a gesture could consist, for example, of Turkey

welcoming ships coming from Cyprus but not flying the Cypriot flag. Efforts to find such a compromise intensified ahead of the EU foreign ministers' meeting in mid-December but they ultimately failed to resolve the impasse.

Turkish politicians blame the slow pace of the negotiations and their looming deadlock squarely on the EU. Some argue that Turkey can hardly be expected to implement the difficult and costly reforms needed for EU accession while European leaders openly speak out against the country's full membership. Others express surprise that even countries as big as Germany could 'hide' behind the small island of Cyprus, which stands in the way of progress in the accession talks. European politicians are quick to admit that the Cypriot position is stubborn. Some are warning that patience with Cyprus is running out in some of the big member-states, not only because Nicosia is obstructing the Turkish accession process but also because it keeps vetoing Turkish participation in the EU's common security and defence policy. Yet most EU governments are loath to lean on Cyprus too hard. They fear that if they force Cyprus to yield on what it defines as its core national interest, they could one day be put in a similar position by their EU partners. "The principle of the national interest is sacrosanct", sighs one frustrated EU official.

However, there have been numerous instances where EU countries have put pressure on their neighbours to achieve compromise. In 2008, for example, EU leaders persuaded Lithuania to lift its veto on EU-Russia treaty negotiations, although Lithuania's core demands, such as a resumption of Russian oil flows to the Baltic coast and a Russian compromise over Georgia, were not heeded. The Europeans cannot force Cyprus to re-unify. But they can point out to the Greek Cypriots that their veto over much of the Turkish accession process is counterproductive: Cyprus would be the biggest loser if an angry Turkey turned away from the EU, accepted a permanent division of the island, lobbied its friends around the world to recognise Northern Cyprus, and left tens of thousands of troops there indefinitely.

Accession process without progress?

Such mutual recriminations are unlikely to help prevent stalemate in EU-Turkey relations. Yet even if

³ *European Stability Initiative, 'A very special relationship: Why Turkey's EU accession process will continue', November 2010.*

the negotiations come to a de facto standstill, both the EU and Turkey will be keen to avoid a total breakdown of the process.³ Although Turkish politicians now regularly boast that their country does not need the EU, the current

government is highly unlikely to walk away from the accession process. Doing so would play into the hands of those who accuse the ruling AK party of moving Turkey away from the West and towards stronger ties with undemocratic countries in the Middle East, and of pursuing an 'Islamisation' of Turkish society instead of the democratisation required by the EU. Therefore, Prime Minister Erdoğan will probably try to salvage at least the formal trappings of the accession talks – even if there is no more progress on the substance.

Neither is the EU likely to terminate the accession process. Such a decision would require unanimity among the 27 EU governments. Some EU countries, including Finland, Italy, Sweden, Spain and the UK, remain strongly in favour of Turkish membership. Many German politicians, especially in Angela Merkel's CDU, and a solid majority of German citizens are sceptical about Turkish membership. But for the Germans the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (treaties and agreements must be adhered to) ranks more highly than the political convictions of individual leaders. Merkel, despite being personally sceptical about full Turkish membership, therefore argues that the negotiations with Ankara should continue. The leaders of other nations that are predominantly sceptical about Turkish membership, such as the Dutch and the Austrians, take a similar line. Most other EU governments are happy for the process to continue, safe in the knowledge that it will still take many years. Moreover, companies from across Europe are doing a brisk trade with Turkey's fast-growing economy. Business leaders have become more vocal calling on their governments to not risk a rupture in EU-Turkey relations.

It therefore looks unlikely that the process would be terminated even if there was no more progress on opening chapters. But other, somewhat less serious consequences could follow. Erdoğan – feeling slighted by the EU and under pressure from nationalists at home – could show the cold shoulder to the EU, at least for a while.⁴ Turkey could refuse to co-operate with the EU on foreign policy or energy security, insisting that if the Europeans want to work with Turkey in these important areas they need to unblock the accession process. Meanwhile, Turkey could impress on the EU that it has other options by seeking a stronger alliance with Russia, planning a Middle Eastern Union or reinforcing bonds with Central Asia.

⁴ *Turkey did so in 1997, when EU leaders invited the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Cyprus, to start accession talks – but not Turkey, which had applied a decade earlier. For two years, Ankara stopped all dialogue with the EU, until in 1999 it finally received the status of a candidate country.*

⁵ *It has long rankled with Turkey that – although it shares the EU’s external tariff – it has no say in EU trade policy. When the EU negotiates a free trade agreement, as it has just done with South Korea, Korean exporters gain access to the Turkish market but Turkish companies still have to pay tariffs in Korea while also facing tougher competition in the EU market.*

Although such moves would be largely symbolic, they would strengthen those voices in the EU who argue that Turkey is not a ‘European’ country. Turkey could also become a more difficult partner in economics, for example by demanding that the terms of the EU-Turkey customs union be re-negotiated.⁵

A more positive scenario is one in which, after a few years of little or no progress, the political

environment for the accession talks improves: a more Turkey-friendly president takes charge in France after the 2012 election; a re-elected AKP government tackles political and economic reforms with renewed vigour; public opposition to Turkish membership in Western Europe diminishes as EU growth picks up and immigration debates mature; the Turkish and Greek Cypriots – having stared into the abyss of permanent division – start talking in earnest. But the EU and Turkey would be able to take advantage of a more conducive environment only if two things happen during the time when negotiations are stalled: Turkey would have to continue with economic and political reforms; and the EU and Turkey would need to find a way of developing their relationship outside the narrow confines of the accession process.

Reforms without an anchor

If Turkey continued to strengthen its democracy and improve its economy despite the accession stalemate, this would gravely weaken its opponents inside the EU who argue that Turkey is not serious about living up to European standards. What is more, if the accession talks resumed in earnest in a few years, a well-prepared Turkey could swiftly open and close many chapters and so generate real momentum towards EU membership.

Turkey’s friends inside the EU are exploring how they can help Turkey along the reform path even without formal progress in the negotiations. EU officials point out that the fact that a chapter is not officially open does not mean that the EU is doing nothing to support legal approximation and institution building in that particular area. Turkey will still be the biggest recipient of EU pre-accession aid (€654 million in 2010 alone), EU officials will advise on the compatibility of Turkish

⁶ *The EU pays for judges, policemen and bureaucrats from member-states to work with their Turkish counterparts to get the Turkish court system and state apparatus up to EU standards.*

laws with the *acquis*, and ‘twinning’ projects to strengthen Turkey’s administration will continue.⁶ In its annual progress reports on accession preparations, the Commission has already started to highlight Turkey’s

successes in areas that are officially blocked for negotiations. Although this practice rankles with Cyprus and France, the Commission appears determined to continue it.

However, it is questionable whether such quiet support will be enough to reinvigorate Turkey’s reform process. Before the start of accession talks in 2005, the Erdoğan government (and its predecessor until 2002) pushed through numerous courageous measures to bring Turkey’s democracy closer to European standards and open up the economy. Since then, however, the pace of reforms has slowed significantly.⁷ Repeated statements

from the Turkish government that reforms would proceed regardless of the state of EU negotiations have started to ring hollow. The European Commission’s progress reports have listed the same remaining challenges year after year: better protection of minority rights, more religious freedom for non-Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities, devolution of powers to the local level, thorough reform of the judiciary, and continued economic improvements. In its latest report, the Commission recounts many small and positive steps, for example allowing Turkish Christians to worship more openly. But it also notes that in some areas Turkey is actually going backwards, most notably in media freedom.⁸ Scores of Turkish journalists have been prosecuted, even arrested, for various alleged offences under the criminal code, and many others are now too timid to criticise the government.

⁷ *Sinan Ülgen, ‘Turkish politics and the fading magic of EU enlargement’, CER policy brief, September 2010.*

⁸ *European Commission, ‘Turkey 2010 progress report’, November 2010.*

The Commission acknowledges that the constitutional changes that Turks adopted in a referendum in September were “a step in the right direction” towards more democratisation. The amendments addressed such long-standing EU demands as creating an ombudsman that Turks can turn to when they feel their human rights have been violated, giving civil servants the right to strike and reducing the role of military tribunals. But the Commission, alongside many Turks, was unhappy that the way the government pushed the reforms through – via a referendum, rather than a parliamentary compromise – further increased Turkey’s already deep political divisions. Many observers also worry about the way the changes are being implemented: for example, the AKP is using the reinforced role of the parliament (dominated by the AK members) and the president (a former AK leader) in appointing judges to place their ‘own’ people in the judiciary. The AKP used to accuse the established Kemalist parties of using the state apparatus – the judiciary, the ministries, the bodies controlling

education – to cement their power, reward their cronies and keep down their opponents. Now such allegations are heaped onto the AKP itself.⁹

⁹ Katinka Barysch, 'Turkey's turmoil', CER insight, April 2010.

Judging by the slow pace of change, and the setbacks seen in some areas, it seems that in Turkey the EU is already losing the anchor function that it has traditionally provided for acceding countries. Until a few years ago, Turkish politicians would regularly point to the EU when pushing through controversial measures. In the run-up to the constitutional referendum in September, the EU was hardly mentioned. Nor was it a factor when the Erdoğan government started a courageous campaign to give more rights to the country's 14 million Kurds in the summer of 2009 (this so-called democratic opening subsequently ground to a halt, when Kurdish militants temporarily took up arms again).

Turkey's rising self-confidence, coupled with growing scepticism about the EU, will make it harder for the EU to influence Turkish policies. However, both trends may well turn out to be superficial and transient. The Europeans should not adopt a defeatist attitude if Turkey at times appears boisterous or detached.

Turkey still needs the EU

Turkish politicians now regularly claim that the EU needs Turkey more than vice versa. Egemen Bağış, Turkey's chief negotiator with the EU, has told the EU to "hold on tight, Turkey is coming to your rescue".¹⁰ Turkey's supreme confidence is fuelled by its relative economic success and its growing importance as a regional and international player. Both developments may turn out less sustainable than they appear at present.

¹⁰ Interview in *The European*, October 18th 2010.

Although Turkey's swift recovery from the 2009 recession is striking, some economists are sceptical about the country's medium-term growth potential. Turkey's savings rate is too low to finance the country's investment needs. A long boom would once again generate a gaping external deficit, leaving Turkey vulnerable to changes in investor sentiment. The labour market is rigid, skills are in short supply and much of the education system remains rather basic. Regional gaps in wealth and economic development remain huge. Economists think that Turkey may be able to grow by 5 per cent in the medium term, which sounds impressive by European standards. But it probably will not be enough to create jobs for the hundreds of thousands of young Turks pushing onto the labour market every year. The economic basis of Turkey's self-confidence could be brittle unless the government steps up the pace of economic reforms. Since Turkey no longer relies on the

IMF for support and advice, Turkey would greatly benefit from EU guidance.

Similarly, Turkey's hyperactive regional policy has unquestionably made Turks feel more important and gained them much esteem in their neighbourhood and beyond. Turkey has improved relations with most of its neighbours and started playing a constructive role in some regional hotspots, for example in Iraq. But in other places, Turkey's foreign policy has not produced tangible results so far. "Turkey is stuck all around", says Soli Özel, a foreign affairs commentator. Turkey's 2009 rapprochement with Armenia has been derailed. Azerbaijan's attitude towards Turkey has improved as a result – but suspicions remain deep between the leaders of the two countries. A less isolated Syria is becoming cockier in its relationship with Turkey. Ankara's insistence on maintaining a dialogue and economic links with Iran does not appear to have helped much in nudging Tehran towards a compromise over its nuclear programme. Turkey's tense relationship with Israel now makes it impossible for Ankara to play the coveted role of a peace broker in the region.

Ankara is realising that its foreign policy objective of 'zero problem with the neighbours' will at least take a very long time to be realised. Meanwhile, some of the Erdoğan government's foreign policy moves, such as its vote against new Iranian sanctions in the UN Security Council, initial opposition to a NATO missile defence plan and belligerent rhetoric towards Israel, have shocked or antagonised many in the US and the EU. Turkey may already be grasping the limits of its newly independent foreign policy. Some observers detect signs that Ankara is keen to 're-align' more closely with the West, without, however, abandoning its regional leadership aspirations.

Closer co-operation with the EU could help Turkey to strike a balance in its foreign policy. Both the EU and Turkey want their neighbourhoods to be stable, peaceful and prosperous. That includes sustainable solutions to the manifold conflicts in the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans, better access to energy resources in the Caspian, and keeping an eye on Russia's influence in the former Soviet space.

Even if Turkish politicians toned down their excitement about their country's rising importance, many worry that the Turkish people have simply gone off the idea of joining the EU. In mid-2010, 38 per cent of Turks supported joining the EU, down from 73 per cent in 2004. Only 13 per cent said that the EU should be Turkey's preferred partner internationally, while 20 per cent thought that Turkey should prioritise working with Middle Eastern countries.¹¹ However, the

¹¹ German Marshall Fund, 'Transatlantic trends survey 2010', September 2010.

Turks' disillusionment with the EU may disappear quickly if bilateral relations improve. Given that Turks feel rejected by the EU, their growing scepticism could be "an intuitively defensive response to unfriendly

¹² Ilter Turan, 'Somebody love me, I wonder who', *GMF On Turkey analysis*, October 2010.

commentary emanating from some European capitals and leaders".¹² Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu claims that "if there was a Cyprus settlement or if Turkey received visa-free travel, Turkish support for the EU would rise to 80 per cent in one day".¹³ Even though those two things look out of reach in the foreseeable future, Davutoglu is probably right that

¹³ *Speech at the Bosphorus conference in Istanbul*, October 2010.

Turkish opinion towards the EU would lighten up quickly if relations improved in other ways. It is all the more important that Turkey and the EU find a way of mitigating the impact that an impending impasse in accession negotiations may have on the overall relationship.

Turkey-EU relations beyond accession

EU accession is a tightly scripted process in which the applicant country gradually converges towards the political, economic and legal standards that prevail among the EU member-states. The process is complex, time-consuming and often frustrating for the applicant country which invariably finds itself in the position of a demandeur. As Turkey's self-esteem has risen in recent years, Ankara has been less happy with the EU treating it solely as an applicant country. Turkish politicians and commentators have demanded that their country be taken seriously as a regional power and international player. The EU initially had some trouble dealing with

¹⁴ Katinka Barysch, 'Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?', *CER policy brief*, January 2010.

such requests.¹⁴ But there is now agreement among EU countries that the EU-Turkey relationship must become broader and more balanced.

If the EU and Turkey managed to build a broader relationship, the two sides might be able to stay on fairly amicable terms if the accession talks stalled. They could deepen collaboration in areas such as foreign policy, crisis management and energy security. If Turkey and the EU were seen to be working together constructively, current opposition to Turkish membership on both sides might lessen. The resumption and acceleration of accession talks at a later stage would then be easier.

The most promising areas for EU-Turkey co-operation outside the accession talks are energy, security and defence, and foreign policy. Cyprus is blocking the opening of the energy chapter in the Turkish accession talks because of a dispute over exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the EU has been

trying to persuade Turkey to join the 'energy community treaty', a legal framework under which Balkan countries and some former Soviet ones are aligning their energy laws and policies with those of the EU. After much hesitation, Ankara started negotiating its accession to the treaty in 2009. However, obstacles to energy co-operation remain, not least the embryonic state of the EU's own energy security policy. Those obstacles pale in comparison with those preventing the EU and Turkey from working together in security and defence. Cyprus is obstructing Turkish participation in the EU's common security and defence policy while Turkey blocks Cypriot participation in NATO-EU co-operation. The result is a damaging stand-off that is making politicians and generals in Europe and America increasingly cross with both Turkey and Cyprus. For now, that leaves foreign policy as the most promising area for EU-Turkey co-operation.

The Lisbon treaty, in force since the end of 2009, in principle allows the EU to co-ordinate foreign policy with other EU policies such as enlargement, aid or energy. The treaty therefore enables the EU to take a broader and more flexible approach to Turkey, one that combines elements of integration and co-operation. In 2010, the EU made some steps towards implementing such a new approach. In July, for the first time, Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative for foreign policy, and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu met alongside the EU's enlargement commissioner and the Turkish chief negotiator. The meeting presented an opportunity to discuss accession related business as well as international issues of mutual concern, such as Iran's nuclear programme or stability in the Caucasus. EU officials think that such four-way meetings will continue to take place once or twice a year. Although Ashton and Davutoglu also meet at the margins of international gatherings, genuine co-operation would require regular meetings at all levels and active alignment of positions. The two sides made a start in the spring of 2010, when EU and Turkish officials met to discuss Bosnia-Herzegovina's progress towards building a functioning system of governance. Although this initial meeting did not bring the EU and Turkey closer to a common position, both sides say they remain open to continue such issue-specific dialogues.

From 2011 onwards, the EU's new External Action Service (which merges the European Commission's external relations departments with the foreign policy bits of the Council of Minister's secretariat and adds national diplomats) will have a dedicated Turkey desk that should allow EU policy towards Turkey to go beyond accession. However, the turf battles that have paralysed EU foreign policy during the establishment of the EAS may also frustrate attempts to broaden EU-Turkey relations. Enlargement Commissioner Füle

already warns that “we can have fresh thinking about EU-Turkey relations as long as it does not impinge on

¹⁵ *Speech at the Bosphorus conference in Istanbul, October 2010.* the agreed framework of accession. We cannot change the rules in mid-game.”¹⁵

Obstacles to a broader relationship also exist on the Turkish side. Ankara has been generally suspicious of EU moves to build links outside the accession process, lest these push Turkey into some kind of privileged partnership. This opposition has been softening a bit as Turkey has begun demanding to be treated differently from Macedonia, Iceland and other smaller EU aspirants. The Turkish government thinks that the best way for the EU to acknowledge Turkey’s importance as a rising power, without surreptitiously building a privileged partnership, would be to invite Prime

¹⁶ *The leaders of candidate countries used to be invited to EU summits before 2007, partly to console Bulgaria and Romania over not being allowed to join in 2004.*

Minister Erdoğan to EU summits.¹⁶ Many EU governments do not like this idea. Some argue that Turkey has not done enough to ‘earn’ a seat at the top table. Others fear that spats with Cyprus could dominate such get-togethers.

Instead, both Turkey and the EU are now exploring whether the Turkish foreign minister may start attending EU foreign ministers’ meetings on an informal basis. Such an arrangement may not be Ankara’s preferred choice, and it still elicits opposition on the EU side, but it would be an important step towards putting the relationship on a sounder footing. However, such foreign policy co-operation would only bear fruits – and have positive spill-over effects for the accession process – if both the EU and Turkey showed more goodwill and flexibility. Turkey should be more willing to align itself with EU foreign policy positions and avoid damaging unilateral action, while the EU should be prepared to acknowledge Turkey’s legitimate interests in the Middle East, the Caucasus and other regions, and take advantage of Turkey’s regional links and soft power.

Avoiding the impasse

Turkey and the EU have limited time left to prevent a damaging stalemate, or perhaps even a breakdown, in their relationship. Turkey needs to continue consolidating its democracy and reforming its economy – not only because such measures are good for Turkey itself (as Turkish politicians argue tirelessly) but also because they would convince the sceptics in the EU that Turkey is serious about living up to European standards. Prime Minister Erdoğan has promised that Turkey will start a broad debate on a new, liberal constitution after the 2011 election. Whichever party or coalition takes power after that election should instigate a broad debate on a new constitutional order. Meanwhile, the hitherto stubborn

and eurosceptic opposition is showing a renewed interest in the EU. Under its new leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the Kemalist CHP is rebranding itself as a force in favour of EU accession. If this shift is successful, the CHP could put pressure on the ruling AKP to implement reforms to prepare Turkey for EU membership.

The Turkish people have been moving towards Europe for centuries and Turkey has been seeking membership of the EU for decades. Today many Turks feel that they do not need the EU or that their country’s pursuit of membership is futile as long as political and public opposition in the EU remains strong. However, the implications of Turkey walking away from the accession process could be huge. “Turkey is used to not making progress in its relationship with the EU,” says Michael Thumann, who writes for *Die Zeit* in Istanbul, “but Turks would be in shock if they woke up one day soon and realised that their decade old dream of joining the EU had suddenly gone.”

The EU, meanwhile, must reassure Turkey that the long-term objective of its full membership remains valid. And it needs to work harder to build a mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey that goes beyond the narrow confines of the accession process. The idea of inviting the Turkish foreign minister to join his EU colleagues at some of their get-togethers is a good one. And the consultations on issues of mutual concern, such as political reform in Bosnia, should become an integral feature of EU-Turkey relations. There are other things the EU could do to make Turkey feel valued. Turkey is rightly aggrieved that most Balkan countries (which have not even begun accession talks) now enjoy visa-free travel to the EU. Turkey’s own visa facilitation talks are once again frozen because of Greece’s concerns about outstanding border issues and fears of illegal immigration.

The EU needs a constructive relationship with Turkey – to maintain its attractiveness in the neighbourhood and beyond, in particular in the Muslim world; to address frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and elsewhere; to enhance its energy security; to reinvigorate its economy by integrating with one of Europe’s fastest growing emerging markets; to prove that the enlargement process has not stopped; and to demonstrate that it can work successfully with rising powers. If the EU is to prevent a breakdown in its relationship with Turkey, it needs to show more creativity and determination.

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