

EU-Turkey: A new negotiation chapter will open conditionally

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On the 25 June the Council of the EU decided to formally open the “regional policies” chapter in negotiations on Turkey joining the EU. The council abstained from issuing final agreement for talks to begin with Ankara until the European Commission’s annual report on the situation in Turkey is published. This means the talks on the first chapter in three years will be postponed from June until at least October, when the commission is expected to present its report. The confrontational stance the government has taken towards the mass protests in Turkey has caused some EU member states to call for a postponement. Germany, supported by Holland and Austria, is among the main opponents of opening the talks. Berlin had at first announced it would veto the negotiations but then softened its stance, suggesting the chapter may be formally opened provided that talks begin at a later date. This stance was ultimately adopted by the council. Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu responded positively to the EU’s decision.

Commentary

- The council’s decision has moved the EU’s and Turkey’s political relations away from the danger of a crisis which would have arisen were the chapter not to have been opened. Nevertheless, the postponement of the talks is an expression of the EU’s disapproval of the way the Turkish government has behaved towards protesters. It is also a signal that progress in accession talks will be dependent on Turkey’s internal situation. It cannot be taken for granted that talks on the new chapter will commence following the publication of the European Commission’s report, since in the last two years the commission has been critical of the Turkish government for failing to implement reforms to bring the country closer to EU norms and for slowing down the process of democratisation.
- The diplomatic efforts made by Ankara to ensure the opening of the chapter indicate how important it is for Ankara that accession negotiations with the EU continue. From Ankara’s perspective, the conditional opening of the chapter is halfway to success. Although the initial plan to begin talks already in June has not been achieved, Turkey has managed to stave off the threat of a crisis in relations with the EU. On the domestic political scene the government can boast of progress in the accession talks; even if the progress is not real, it is at least formal.

- By putting negotiations off until October, Berlin has demonstrated its dismay with how the Turkish government has mishandled the protests. Germany's move also shows its desire to apply pressure on the government in Ankara to change its behaviour towards the protesters. The CDU/CSU's manifesto for the September Bundestag election rules out full EU membership for Turkey. Nor does the term "privileged partner" appear in their manifesto, despite the fact that it has been present in previous party documents. The Christian Democrats suggest that Turkey joining the EU would be a burden for the EU due to Turkey's demographic potential and economic structure. Erdogan's policy during protests has served as a convenient excuse for Germany's ruling Christian Democrats to put back negotiations on further accession chapters.