

A new impetus in relations between Ankara and Brussels

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On 22 October the Council of the European Union decided to open a negotiating chapter on regional policy in its accession negotiations with Ankara. A week earlier the European Commission published a report which detailed the reforms which Turkey had made over the last year. In the report the European Commission criticised the Turkish government for its disproportionate use of force in countering the mass protests which took place in May and June this year and for its confrontational style of government. On the other hand, the commission praised a series of reforms and political initiatives undertaken by the AKP government, including: the launch of a peace process with the Kurdish minority, reforms of the legal system, and the package of democratic reforms. Negotiations on the new chapter are scheduled to start on 5 November this year.

Commentary

- This is the first negotiating chapter to be opened in three years and it goes some way to break the deadlock in negotiations on Turkey's membership in the EU. The decision made by the Council of the EU and the European Commission's relatively favourable report show that the EU is interested in improving its bilateral relations with Turkey. In recent years the relationship suffered from the impasse in accession negotiations, from EU's criticism of lack of reforms in Turkey, Ankara's boycott of the Cypriot presidency in 2012 and from the government's confrontational attitude towards social protests in May and June this year.
- Contrary to its practice to date, the European Commission has taken into account reforms and political initiatives yet to be completed and even those which are only in the planning phase (for example the announcement on the electoral threshold being brought down). This has enabled Turkey to be presented in a more favourable light than previously (for example in the 2012 report). The commission's new approach is unlikely to have arisen due to a recognition of Turkey's progress in democratising the country but rather out of conviction that any further escalation of the tension between Brussels and Ankara would accelerate the erosion of the EU's image in Turkey (both with the government and society) and would further limit the EU's influence in the country and could even break off the accession process. It may be expected that in relaunching the negotiations Brussels will regain some influence on the reform process in Turkey, particularly if further negotiating chapters are opened in the next few months.

- Despite formal progress in the accession process, the opening of a new negotiating chapter does not constitute a breakthrough in Turkey's efforts to join the EU. The EU is still blocking 16 of the 35 chapters and has ruled out any of them being closed until Ankara recognises Cyprus as a member of the Turkish-EU customs union. The main obstacle, however, is the lack of political will among the EU states to accept Turkey as a member of the EU. This is motivated by concern about the costs of welcoming a state which has 75 million inhabitants and whose European character is questioned by a substantial section of EU citizens. According to the survey conducted by German Marshall Fund (Transatlantic Trends) in 2013, only 20% of EU citizens were in favour of Turkey joining the EU, with 33% against it; 37% were neither for nor against and 9% did not respond.