



Cyprus, Turkey and the EU. Inextricably bound in a vicious circle

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The upcoming developments in the peace-talks between the two Cypriot communities' representatives, i.e. Dimitris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, will have a significant impact on the future of the divided Mediterranean island as well as on the accession process of Turkey to the EU. All parties involved in the "Cyprus – Turkey – EU" triangle eagerly waited for the conclusions of the EU's General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council held in December 2009. Since Brussels decided to freeze the accession talks with Ankara in 2006 in eighth out of thirty-one chapters due to the non-compliance of Turkey with the provisions of the Ankara Protocol, according to which it has to open its ports and airport to the Republic of Cyprus' vessels and aircrafts and also to recognize all EU member states, Ankara's accession process has not been moving smoothly forward in the unaffected chapters either.

Being aware of the magnitude of the ongoing peace-talks, which are often referred to as "the last unique chance" to deliver a unification of the island, the Greek Cypriot government actively sought a way to put an extra pressure on Ankara and thus to pursue own foreign policy goals in the framework of the EU. Despite proclamations by the Greek Cypriot Foreign Minister Markos Kyprianou "that Nicosia did not intend to veto Turkey's EU accession process" **(1)**, the Greek Cypriot President Dimitris



Christofias sent a letter to the heads of governments in Europe, in which he demanded support for suspension of accession talks of Turkey in some extra chapters and a harsh wording of the Council conclusions which were to be drafted. However, once the meeting of the plenipotentiaries of the EU member states was over, a Greek Cypriot journalist Loucas Charalambous had to conclude “our government was left on its own again. None of the other member states – not even Greece – supported the idea of the veto” **(2)**.

Unlike what the Greek Cypriots hoped for, the Council did not introduce any extra sanctions on Turkey and the conclusions it delivered did not differ much from the last year’s wording. It simply reads as follows: “Council will maintain its measures from 2006, which will have a continuous effect on the overall progress in the negotiations” **(3)**. This means that no extra chapters will be frozen and the accession process of Turkey will continue. However, it was also stressed that “Progress [in a non-discriminatory implementation of the Ankara Protocol] is now expected without further delay... The Council also expects Turkey to actively support the ongoing negotiations aimed at a fair, comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus problem” **(4)**. According to the comments by the Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, at the press conference, which followed after, this kind of language was “rightly balanced”. In fact, the decision of the EU to send out a neutral rather than a negative signal was of utmost importance. The conclusions of the Council can be thus seen as a test case for the already hampered EU – Turkey relations, in which the latter seems to play the role of a mystical Tantalus. A neutral decision, which does not imply slowing down of the accession process, is important not only from the political point of view but also in the light of the vanishing Turkish public support for their country’s membership in the EU.



The latest Eurobarometer results of December 2009 revealed that only 45 per cent of the population in Turkey believes that membership in the EU would be a good thing **(5)**. Baring in mind that the support was three percent higher half a year ago and almost thirty percent higher five years ago, the downtown trend seems to be hardly reversible, especially when some foremost EU representatives keep questioning the eligibility of Turkey to enter the Union. For example, the newly elected President of the European Council, a Belgian politician Herman Van Rompuy proclaimed: "The universal values which are in force in Europe, and which are also fundamental values of Christianity, will lose vigour with the entry of a large Islamic country such as Turkey" **(6)**. While the Europeans are still struggling with figuring out a common position on the "Turkish question", the issue keeps shaping the inner developments within the Union. For example a couple of weeks ago, "Bildt was one of the top candidates on the position of the 'Minister of Foreign Affairs of the EU'. It is said that one of the reasons why he did not get it was his inclination towards Turkey – according to the viewpoint of Paris and Berlin" **(7)**.

While some in the EU object Turkey's entrance to the EU in a purely rhetorical way, the Greek Cypriot Minister of Foreign Affairs, Markos Kyprianou has already announced a plan for an unilateral introduction of "conditions for the opening of each chapter" **(8)**, thus to independently freeze five to six more chapters in the Turkey's accession process in order to accomplish what they were not able to achieve at the December Summit. If they manage to do so, this would amount to the suspension of almost half of the *acquis* in total. On the other hand, Croatia, that started the accession talks at the same day as Turkey did, is expected to successfully finish her negotiations next year. However, Turkey has been able to provisionally close just one single chapter so far. This raises a question about why is there such a huge difference in the speed of accession talks of various countries. Hürriyet Daily News



reported that according to Catherine Ashton “the fact that only one chapter had been completed [by Turkey] was a reason to start a debate” **(9)**.

It is doubtful what kind of debate was she proposing. If a debate focusing on why the accession process is rather steady is opened, it would bring benefit to both EU and Turkey likewise. The Union cannot and should not step back from its commitment made in 2005, when it opened the accession talks with Ankara. On the other hand, Turkey needs to get the accession process back on track especially now that the various domestic turmoils start popping up and bringing the country into political unrests. If the reform process triggered by the wishful aspirations to join the EU a couple of years ago kept on progressing without further delays, e.g. the current closure of a parliamentarian party in Turkey would be rather unlikely.

However, the future of the EU – Turkey relations is by a great deal dependant on what will happen in the Cyprus peace talks. Of course, a solution to the Cyprus question would not magically imply a speedy progress of the Ankara’s accession talks. However, it would definitely help to unlock the current stalemate. While the EU keeps pressing on Turkey to adopt the Ankara Protocol, Turkey says it will not comply with its provisions unless the EU allows the Turkish Cypriots to trade with other EU member states freely as it was promised five years ago. However, the Greek Cypriots will keep on blocking the implementation of the Direct Trade Regulation, a pending of which is causing an economic isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community, until Turkey adopts the Ankara Protocol. This situation and positions of respective parties seems to create a vicious circle, from it is impossible to get out.

According to the Turkey’s chief negotiator for EU Affairs Egemen Bağış, Ankara is ready to adopt the necessary provisions of the Ankara Protocol if the EU acts, as



well. “We would be more than happy to deliver on our promises simultaneously” **(10)**, Bağış said. However, up to these days, the parties are waiting on “the other side” to make the first step and are rather reluctant to trust each other up to such a degree that they would be ready to do simultaneous gestures. Turkey’s government already lost much of its public support when it loudly supported the Annan Plan V, which shipwrecked due to a Greek Cypriot “no” shortly before the Republic of Cyprus became an EU member. They are not willing to risk their political career with the same issue for the second time by making unilateral gestures, if the reaction of the other parties involved is uncertain. They are surely in a desperate need of a simultaneous offer from the Greek Cypriot side or from the EU, in order to “sell” the decision of adopting the provisions of the Ankara Protocol to the Turkish public. On one hand the Cyprus question has already become a non-issue for the Turkish public because they think that Cyprus has already been lost. Yet on the other, any move done by the government seems to work as a wake-up call for the nationalistic moods and therefore the issue is still very sensitive. If the Turkish ports and airport are opened and if there is no Greek Cypriot reaction to this gesture, the Turkish Cypriots would fear that the Greek Cypriots will lose most of their motivation for being involved in the bi-communal peace talks. On the contrary, if a free trade is enabled without any concessions on the side of Turkey, the Greek Cypriots would fear this would pave a way for the Turkish Cypriots to become truly independent and that the Greek Cypriots would lose their leverage. However, the problem is more complex than that and there is not much time left for the delivery of a comprehensive solution.

Despite the confident proclamations by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban-Ki Moon, who said in his latest report: “The parties are making solid progress, and I am cautiously optimistic that a solution can be achieved,” the problem is that the solution needs to be achieved in a couple of weeks. In spring, there will be presidential elections in the northern part of the island and it is expected that the



current pro-solution Turkish Cypriot leader will be replaced by Derviş Eroğlu, who is not a big fan of compromise. Thus, with the change of the leader, it is very likely that also the nature and the overall atmosphere of the talks will change. Since Talat already announced that the talks will need to be stopped in mid-February because of the election campaign, the time is running out. There are approximately only around 50 days for Talat and Christofias to make a major move in the accession talks. It is hard to determine whether the Turkish government and the Turkish Cypriots will be successful in their pursuit of early referenda. Firstly, for referenda to take place, the two Cypriot leaders need to come up with a solution they want to be voted on, secondly, it is not clear whether the Turkish Cypriots as well as the Greek Cypriots would both be willing to vote yes and support any deal.

While the two Cypriot leaders will be holding approximately three meetings a week and work under time pressure, at the same time the representatives of the Greek Cypriot government in Brussels will be trying to hamper the accession talks of Turkey by blocking the opening of additional chapters of the *acquis*. This two-sided policy is not likely to influence the developments of the talks and the mutual trust between the negotiating parties in a positive way. Moreover, unlike in the pre-Council meeting, the Greece's Deputy Foreign Minister Dimitris Droutsas seems to support this idea. "If the governments of 27 countries overlook Turkey's non-recognition of Cyprus, the 2006 decision calling on Turkey to change this attitude, as well as the EU's honor, would become worthless" (11) he said. It is not hard to believe that the scenario of a further suspension would actually materialize. We have already witnessed how Greece pushed on the EU when the Cyprus' membership was in question a couple of years ago. The voting procedures of the Union provide for every country to veto anything related to the external affairs. The unanimous voting was introduced, so that only decisions based on compromise would be feasible. However, what was meant to push for cooperation might be (once again) misused by Greece and the Greek



Cypriots for a successful pursuit of a hard-line policy. Ankara acts alike and blocks Cyprus' membership in other international organizations of which Turkey is already a member and the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, Cemil Çiçek declared: "If you tell us to choose either Cyprus or the EU, we will choose Cyprus" (12). Thus, as the time is running out for the Cyprus leaders to deliver a solution, the parties involved seem to be bound in the same vicious circle as a couple of years ago. While it cannot be proclaimed that nothing at all has changed, it can surely be proclaimed that for a significant progress to be achieved with respect to the Cyprus – Turkey – EU triangle, all of the parties have to pro-actively seek a solution and stop asking the "other one" to deliver unilateral actions. As in any vicious circle, the move of just one item is prevented by the fact that it is dependant and connected to all the other items in the circle. While in the case of a solution to the Cyprus problem, all parties will win, in the case of the lack of a solution, all parties will lose.

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