

UNDERSTANDING NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN TURKEY'S ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

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Erdogan's visit to Paris is an additional sign of the recent Franco-Turkish rapprochement. This rapprochement started in October and is based on two foundations. First, France's commitment that it will cease to make any public statements regarding the possibility of a privileged partnership as an alternative to the membership option and to allow the negotiation process to continue with the exception of the five chapters already frozen by France. Second, the removal of all obstacles regarding the participation of French firms in the Nabucco project or other economic activities in Turkey. This arrangement is the outcome of many discussions between the two sides. All started when France asked Turkey to improve their stalling bilateral relations and the ending of Turkish objections to the participation of Gaz de France to Nabucco pipeline. The Turkish side replied that it was not possible to improve relations while France promotes the privileged partnership option among the EU member states. In support of this position Ankara argues that is not fair to be pressed for the necessary adjustment to the *acquis* and at the same time to undermine the membership goal. As Turkey explains internal reforms can be easier only if the membership option remains clear and feasible. Eventually the two sides came to a compromise. France will maintain its position for a privileged partnership and keep its veto regarding the five chapters but at the same time it will end its public statements in favour of the privilege partnership.

During the last months both countries have kept their promises with France avoiding any negative statements and keeping a moderate stance during the December's European council and Turkey allowing Gaz de France participation into the Nabucco project. In addition officials from both countries have paid visits to each other and promoted bilateral relations. Erdogan's latest statement that he hopes France will change its position regarding Turkey's accession to the EU is perhaps indicative that although the French position remains unchanged eventually the final decision on the issue will be taken in the future.

Before Erdogan's statement German Chancellor Merkel made a more detailed analysis on how her country (together with France) define privileged partnership or at least how the accession negotiations will proceed. According to Merkel Turkey has to continue with the negotiation and the necessary adjustments and internal reforms in all chapters except the five ones that is the core of the membership status. Merkel's five chapters not accidentally coincide with the five already been frozen by France. As Merkel explained this is an open ended process and final decisions will be taken after the successful conclusion of the negotiations in all other chapters except the five ones.

Erdogan and AKP look satisfied with this arrangement because they can continue in the name of EU membership the reforms in Turkey and by this to win the internal power game against the kemalists. The Turkish leadership is also optimistic that by the time of final decisions their country will be economically wealthy and politically strong so that the Europeans, including the Germans and the French, will prefer to have Turkey in the Union.

The Commission's initiative to restart the process regarding the approval of the direct trade (with the occupied areas of Cyprus) regulation seems to be another part of this understanding. Without de-freezing the 8+6 chapters the whole understanding will remain meaningless. Only with the approval of the regulation and the opening of Turkish ports and airports to Cypriot ships and airplanes it will be feasible to (Germany and France) remove the existing obstacles to Turkey's accession negotiations with the annulment of the Council's 2006 decision. EU leading countries have come to the conclusion that they need Turkey as economic, energy and regional partner and in order to achieve that Greek and Cypriot objections must be overcome in one way or another. The Socialist group in the European Parliament has already expressed its support the initiative of Commissioner Fuller. After President Christofias' protests the Group expressed some reservations and with a new statement made a clear connection with the need for a simultaneous implementation of the Additional Protocol by Turkey. It will not be a surprise to see this happen in the next few months. Turkey has no problem to open its ports and airports if it gets the political upgrading of the Turkish Cypriot illegal entity. We must also remember that Turkish ports used to be open for ships under Cypriot flag until 1987.

This new understanding is influenced by Turkey's growing economic strength and regional influence. Erdogan's Turkey is a different country that it was before. Nowadays Turkey is part of the G20, non permanent member of the UN Security Council. A Turk parliamentarian presides the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and a Turkish professor is currently the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Turkish armed forces are among the most powerful in the region and participate in a number of international peacekeeping missions. Its growing influence in Middle Eastern matters has made it part of all discussions on international and regional level regarding the Palestinian issue, the Syrian-Israeli conflict or the Iranian nuclear program.

Having all the above in mind I come to conclusion that there is a new dynamic in the EU-Turkey relations. The two sides have set new rules that will enable the unhindered continuation of the accession negotiations process. They will reassess the situation in the future after the successful conclusion of the current phase and before de-freezing of the five "French" chapters. This new dynamic will change the current status quo in Cyprus in a dramatic way. Pressure will increase on the Greek Cypriot community to accept a solution formula closer to the Annan Plan or to see the fast Taiwanization of the northern part of Cyprus.