



Event Report

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Communication to members

Turkey's EU accession process: state of play

Breakfast Policy Briefing - 25 June 2009

Summary

Turkey is updating its institutions and laws in preparation for its EU membership, which it sees as a 'win-win' situation for both Ankara and Brussels, Egemen Bağış, Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator for EU accession, told an EPC Breakfast Policy Briefing, organised in collaboration with the Turkish Industry & Business Association (TÜSIAD). Membership will strengthen Turkish democracy and protect the EU from outside threats. Unfortunately, EU politicians are exploiting fears about Turkey's membership for political gain.

Full Report

Egemen Bağış, Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator for EU accession, speaking just after the Turkish Parliament passed a law giving the EU Secretariat in Ankara more flexibility, budget and more staff, said this law passed almost unanimously with bipartisan support, demonstrating once again that the whole country is united over its desire to see Turkey where she belongs – as a full EU member.

The EU is complicated, said Minister Bağış, and the more he learnt about it, the more he realised that it needs Turkey as a member. This will be a 'win-win' situation, so he needs to convince 70 million Turks that the EU will help strengthen its democracy, and convince 500 million EU citizens that Turkey will protect the Union from outside threats.

This is not an easy job, as the EU is going through a period of enlargement fatigue and Turkey is going through its own personal assessment. Mr Bağış likened Turkey to the EU's 'dietician': while the EU has enlarged to 27 members in order to become healthier, more dynamic and prosperous, some people think its "arteries are blocked". It is beset with problems of energy security, climate change, immigration, the economy, the fight against narcotics and stopping illegal immigrants.

Turkey can help to solve these problems. It will strengthen the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy by encouraging the "harmony of civilisations", and the EU's outreach to the East. "Turkey is the most Western part of the East, and the most Eastern part of the West," he said. It has given peace to humanity, and the city of Istanbul has grown up around different religions and cultures.

"The European Union is the grandest peace project in human history and Turkey's integration will be its crown," he added. The world's 1.5 billion Muslims, who feel isolated from the West, are closely monitoring Turkey's accession bid.

When negotiations on Turkish membership opened in 2005, 300 journalists from Muslim nations came to Brussels to cover this, so Turkey's accession is a message to Turks and to the entire Muslim world.

Turkey is beginning to play a role on the world stage - it has been chosen by 151 countries (out of 191) to have one of the two non-permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. It has the potential to act in bilateral negotiations between



Russia and Georgia, Israel and Syria and Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is one of the few countries that has volunteered to mediate between the US and Iran.

Turkey has recently adopted a national programme on the EU accession to boost the pro-EU reform drive in the country over the next four years. This May, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Brussels to declare the country's determination to become an EU member, and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso stressed that his institution supports Turkey's aspirations for full EU membership.

The government has already taken many steps to prepare for this. It has recognised its Kurdish population - ten years ago, people were scared to admit they were Kurdish, but now there are state-sponsored 24-hour broadcasts in Kurdish - and Ankara has allocated more than €500 million for Turkey's predominantly Kurdish South-eastern region.

It has also recently approved the Kyoto Protocol, so is ready to 'open' the environment 'chapter', as part of EU accession negotiations. 1 May has been designated a national holiday, Turkish television has signed an agreement with Euronews which will now also broadcast in Turkish, and a committee has been set up to look at gender equality issues.

Ankara is also revising its tax base: Turkish customs regulations now match EU standards, taxes on the Internet have been lowered, and the tax on alcohol has been revisited. This is all in preparation for opening the EU accession 'chapter' on taxation.

However, this is not an easy task, when so many people exploited the issue of Turkish membership for their own ends during the recent European election campaign - they not only "insulted" Turks in Turkey but also the six million Turks who live in the EU, and encouraged people to discriminate against their Turkish neighbours.

These six million Turks in the EU are equal to more people than the whole population of some EU Member States, he said. Turkey is the EU's seventh large trading partner and 50% of Turkey's trade is with the EU. The EU needs Turkey as much as Turkey needs the EU, he insisted.

Discussion

Asked whether Turkey would accept a 'privileged partnership' with the EU, along the lines of the one that Switzerland has with the EU, Mr Bağış was adamant that this would bring neither privileges nor a partnership - Turkey either becomes a full EU member, or not at all. He noted that every country which had opened negotiations with the EU had completed them. The train was moving and while there might be snow on the tracks, the sun eventually comes out and melts the problems.

Questioned on whether Ankara would withdraw support for the Nabucco Pipeline if the EU energy chapter is not opened, the Minister said that Turkey is a natural hub for energy, so it is amazing that it has not be possible to open this chapter. However, he said opening the energy chapter is not a prerequisite for Turkey's support for Nabucco. He hoped that a deal on Nabucco would be signed in mid-July, but believed that "many Nabuccos will be needed".

Pressed on whether Turkey would open its ports to boats from the Republic of Cyprus, Minister Bağış said the European Council agreed to find a solution to the isolation of Turkish Cypriots, and Ankara expected direct trade would begin with them soon. He compared the situation to Taiwan, a country many nations trade with but do not recognise politically.

Ankara would like to see a fair settlement on Cyprus, and the fact that the two leaders from the two communities met over 30 times over the last year augurs well.



He said the Cyprus issue had not been an obstacle for the Republic of Cyprus' EU membership, so it should not be for Turkey. The island consists of two well-functioning democracies. "It takes two to tango, and we are at the centre of the dancing platform, so please come and join us," he said.

Responding to a suggestion that it was not European politicians but "the man in the street" who will decide whether Turkey will become an EU member, Mr Bağış said the percentage of EU citizens objecting to Turkish membership has dropped from 65% to 50%.

Asked whether Turkey had put a time-limit on the negotiations, the Minister said that when there was a political need, things happen: for example, 18 million East Germans became EU members overnight with no negotiations.

Some 20 million Muslims are EU citizens. Muslim youth in Europe is looking for role models, and they can either follow those who preach terrorism, or they can follow those like Prime Minister Erdoğan who talk about democracy and individual freedoms.

He reiterated the point that Ankara could be helpful in mediating in international conflicts - it is trying to facilitate talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Russia and Georgia, and has opened its air corridors to Armenian flights.