

Ankara warns of rising anti-EU sentiment among Turks

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Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul has warned of a looming anti-west backlash among his country's citizens due to the EU hesitation over Ankara's membership in the European club as well as the US approach in the Middle East.

In an interview with the Financial Times, published on Thursday (20 July), Mr Gul said negative sentiment towards Europe and the US has started spreading among « moderate liberal people » who previously backed Ankara's pro-western orientation.

« If our young, dynamic, educated and economically active people become bitter, if their attitudes and feelings are changed, it is not good. Their feeling has changed towards these global policies and strategic issues. This is dangerous, » said Mr Gul.

The anti-US views have been sparked mainly by Washington's support for Israel's attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon but also by its links with the Iraqi government which indirectly supports the Kurdish guerrillas that operate on its borders, according to Mr Gul.

Concerning the EU, the Turkish foreign minister views the contentious issue of Cyprus as « poisoning » the process for negotiating Turkey's membership.

In October, the European Commission is due to present a regular report on the progress Ankara has made in reforms and meeting the entry criteria to join the club.

It is expected that its key objection will be Turkey's failure to open its ports and airspace to Cypriot ships and planes as it was obliged to by the EU last year before kicking off the membership talks.

The Greek Cypriot government in Nicosia is poised to block any further moves on the negotiations to try and make Ankara back down - which could lead to a halt of the talks in October.

An impossible step

But Mr Gul reiterated in the interview that it would be « impossible » for any elected government in Turkey to win approval for such a step in the national parliament unless Nicosia also lifted its veto on an EU trade deal with the Turkish enclave of northern Cyprus.

EU ministers agreed to end the isolation of the enclave in 2004, after its citizens voted in favour of a UN plan on unification of the island - divided since 1974 - while Greek Cypriots rejected it.

One positive move between the disputed sides came earlier this month when the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders agreed to resume dialogue and UN-sponsored peace talks.

« We must get rid of this problem, » said Mr Gul, adding that he thinks some EU member states may be hiding behind the Cyprus issue to delay Ankara's membership talks.

The issue looks certain to be the top political hurdle for the current Finnish presidency of the EU.

Turkey acquired candidate country status in 1999, during Helsinki's six-month chairmanship of the then 15-member bloc and following years of reluctance by western Europe to accept its application.

Finnish prime minister Matti Vanhanen said in early July he would consider it his personal failure if Turkey's talks had to be suspended, while foreign minister Erkki Tuomioja told MEPs recently it is better for Europe in the long run to have a democratic Turkey in the club.

But they both also underlined that Ankara's fulfilment of its obligation on access to Cypriot ships and planes remains key in achieving progress.