

EU, Turkey and the agricultural sector

An interview of M. Mehdi Eker, Turkish Agriculture Minister

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Turkey entered 2009 with a promise to its European allies that the new year would be a year for Europe. The same promise was made in 2008, and that year was a loss for European Union harmonization efforts.

But this time the government seems to be sincere. Within the first few days of the year, the Third National Plan was approved by the president, and days after that, Cabinet established a new EU Ministry and appointed Egemen Bağış as the chief negotiator and the EU minister. Today's Zaman has decided to keep an eye on the activities of the government on the EU front. Our first stop was Agriculture Minister Mehdi Eker's office. Eker assures Today's Zaman readers that although the three chapters that relate to his ministry will most probably be opened at the very end of the negotiation process, Turkey is already working hard to ensure its compliance with these chapters.

Q.: The chapters blocked by France include the chapter on agriculture and rural development. Why is France in particular and the EU in general afraid of this chapter?

Eker: There are two components of the "hardships" of the agriculture-related chapters. First of all, Turkey has a population of 70 million, and 27 percent of that population is employed in agriculture. Chapter 11 deals with agriculture and rural development jointly. A large agricultural population means a larger investment in rural development. Secondly, agriculture is a low value-added sector. Since the profit is low in this sector, there is off-the-record unemployment there. As EU standards are met, this off-the-record unemployment will move to the cities. This will necessitate development in the industrial and service sectors. We will encounter many problems along the way, and the solutions will require a great deal of money.

Turkey is also a rival of the EU production sector. Our country is very rich in terms of biodiversity. Out of 11,000 to 12,000 endemic plants around the world, 3,500 exist in Anatolia. The mountains lining [the country] create different production zones. Turkey is the largest producer of several agricultural products, and it can produce about 150 different products. Turkey is the seventh largest producer of cereals. With further infrastructural work, it can perform even better. This agricultural production potential presents great economic power and opportunity for Turkey. Turkey produces 40 million tons of raw vegetables and fruits annually. As Turkish soil is rich in phosphates and because of where the country is located, Turkish agricultural products have excellent flavor. If this country manages to use high technology in agricultural production, it will soon become a formidable rival to Europe. The country that resembles Turkey most within the EU is France, with common sectors such as sheep breeding, cereals, sugar beets, vegetable and fruit production, grapes and other Mediterranean products.

So there are two sides to EU resistance to Turkey's membership with regard to agricultural policies: costs and rivalry. If Turkey enters the EU in its current situation, it will take the largest share of the EU's funds, and it will also enter the common market as a very strong competitor to the existing players. For Europe it is best to force Turkey to solve its problems before it joins the union. They want us to tackle the problems of the agricultural population and then come to the negotiating table.

But we are not looking for anything different. We regard the EU *acquis communautaire* as a kind of

“quality standard.” Even if we don’t become a full member of the EU, we believe our people have the right to live under those standards. So we are becoming prepared for the agriculture-related chapters.

Q.: You will certainly tell us about what is being done. Is there anything particularly striking in Turkey’s preparations for these chapters?

Eker: My ministry deals with three chapters: 11, 12 and 13. The first deals with agriculture and rural development, the second with food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy, and the last with fisheries. With regard to these three chapters, we have already passed 12 bills in Parliament. The majority of these were related to EU harmonization. In 2004 we prepared the Agriculture Strategy Document, and agricultural support policies were tied to this document. In the past, politicians were able to promise illogical populist support to farmers because the Cabinet had the authority to decide these policies. This is no longer possible in Turkey.

Within this framework, we had several laws about food, seeds, organic agriculture and agriculture insurance. Our Agriculture Insurance Law was passed at the same time as France. We prepared our Rural Development Strategy and established the Rural Development Support Payments Institution in order to be able to channel EU funds. This is an agency that will use 750 million euros of the EU’s rural development funds before 2013. The agency is in the accreditation process right now. These funds will be used in 42 provinces. These are decided according to objective standards that the EU provides.

We have finished our screening process on the three chapters. This was not easy at all. We informed EU officials about our current situation in terms of our regulations, agriculture, production and support policies. Today the EU knows our position, and we know what they are asking us to do.

Q.: During these screening processes, the EU asks for an enormous amount of detailed statistics. Was the ministry able to gather those statistics? The Europeans want to know the number of animals in the country, you know.

Eker: We have the means for that. In fact the institutional infrastructure existed even before our government. My ministry is organized in 81 provinces and more than 900 counties. As the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government, we established a system of close monitoring in about 10,000 villages through 2,500 agricultural engineers and veterinarians. This is a very sound source of information for us. This information is important for both Turkey and the EU. This information is used in planning, and through the plans, we create our agricultural policies.

With regard to the number of animals in the country, we have an Animal Record System and a Farmer Record System. All agricultural support is bound to this system. If a farmer is not recorded in this system, he cannot apply for state support. This means that we know who will produce what and where from the very beginning. They come on their own and have themselves recorded. I may say that 98 percent of all our bovine animals are recorded.

Q.: But during Kurban Bayramı (the Feast of the Sacrifice), we slaughter a million animals in three days. Are these deducted from the database?

Eker: Yes, indeed. There is a procedure for this that we announce in the press long before the feast. There are rules of transportation that make it impossible to have an animal slaughtered without the state knowing it; it has to have a veterinarian’s health report, an ear tag, a vaccination document and a passport. You may not realize it, but as soon as an animal is slaughtered, its ear tag goes to the central recording system and the animal is deducted from the list. Newborns are added within six months of birth.

Q.: Is there any incentive for farmers to have their animals recorded?

Eker: They receive financial support for their husbandry according to the number of ear tags. An animal without an ear tag cannot be transferred from one place to another. If caught carrying such an animal, the vehicle is prohibited from operating for three months.

Q.: So, we are not very far from meeting EU standards, are we? For example, are we ready in terms of the opening criteria of agriculture-related chapters?

Eker: After the screening process, we were given certain opening criteria. One of these was the establishment of an Agricultural Development Agency that would be accredited by EU institutions. We prepared a program for this agency, and it was accepted by the EU in February 2008. Now we are preparing the draft resolution for this agency and preparing its administrative and institutional infrastructure.

The second criterion we were given was to make direct income and price support policies independent of production. This meant that the financial support the state would give farmers wouldn't be an incentive for increased productivity. This was already done during the term of the previous government. But we thought this wouldn't be suitable for a country like Turkey where productivity is low and the sector is already underdeveloped. With this in mind, we cancelled direct income support altogether and established alternative support mechanisms that would increase productivity.

Q.: You are saying that we differ with the EU on this issue?

Eker: In fact, no. Our formula fits both our aims and the EU criteria. This is too complicated for newspaper readership, but I can assure you that we found an optimal solution that will increase productivity and develop quality standards in keeping with the EU harmonization process. You have to understand that the negotiation process is a negotiation process. There are issues the EU is delaying intentionally, and there are issues we want to delay. You remember, they put the Cyprus issue as a criterion for speaking on fishing!

Q.: It is said that Turkey does not have a real land registry. Do we know, for example, which piece of land produces what particular product at an optimum level?

Eker: In 2003 we started the Agricultural Reform Implementation Project (ARIP), and within that project, we supported the Land Registry General Directorate in order for it to finish the land registry. Today the land registry of Turkey is over 99 percent ready.

Q.: Does this mean that forests will no longer be turned into agricultural land?

Eker: You won't see those kinds of things in Turkey from now on.

Q.: You are drawing a rosy picture. But we know that fisheries were causing environmental pollution on the Aegean coast. Am I wrong?

Eker: You are misinformed. In the past there were no clear-cut criteria for these firms. In 2006 we passed a bill that set criteria [for them], and today all fisheries are operating within these criteria. I am not claiming that all our fisheries are state-of-the-art farms, but they are also improving themselves. The technology is improving. In the past the fishmeal that was used precipitated onto the seabed and created malodor. But today new fishmeal is produced that can stay in the water longer before precipitating. This is good for the fish farmer and good for the environment.

The issue is this: The state decides places for tourism and places for fisheries. After a few years, people go and establish tourism sites close to the fish farms and start complaining about them. No one questions why Turkey is consuming so little white meat. Why shouldn't we develop this facility? During our term in government, we included fisheries in the agricultural support program. The fishing sector was producing 60,000 tons of fish, and now we are producing 130,000-140,000 tons. Today Turkey is among the top three producers of sea bass and sea bream in Europe. When fish farms became an issue in the media, we sent our experts to see the situation in other European countries. The situation in Spain, Italy and Greece is no better than here.

Q.: Another criticism is about our dependence on a particular country in terms of genetically engineered

seeds: Israel.

Eker: That is not true!

Q.: They say we buy all our tomato seeds from Israel.

Eker: No, we buy from several countries.

Q.: Why don't we produce our own? Or do we?

Eker: We have begun to produce our own, and we will do better in the future. Look, you have to ask this question from those who make the most noise about this issue. They are the ones who prevented Turkey from attaining the necessary technology at the first place.

Seed technology is not cheap; it requires time, genetic material, high knowledge-based technology and money. But what if you don't have laws in place to protect the intellectual rights of the company that develops a seed? Would you invest in such a country for research and development (R&D)?

I remember when I was an expert at the Ministry of Agriculture. We prepared a bill regarding vegetable patents. It was during one of these coalition governments. It didn't pass. The Law for Plant Breeders' Rights was passed only under our government in 2004.

Q.: Twenty years of lost time!

Eker: Unfortunately this is true. Within these 20 years, the world developed to a certain extent. Of course, Turkish farmers want to produce more, and they started using foreign seeds. But our situation is not so bad. Look, before us, Turkey imported 90 percent of its hybrid seeds for vegetables. We bought from Germany, the US, the Netherlands and France. After we passed the patent law in 2004, R&D activities started, and by 2008 we became 25 percent self-sustainable in this issue. We are hoping to be 30 percent self-sustainable by 2010, and by 2012-2013, this can go up to 60 percent.

Q.: The prime minister does not like this word, but I cannot help but ask: Will there be a crisis in the agricultural sector in 2009?

Eker: The crisis is mainly in international finance circles. Our farmers do not take loans from these markets. The sources of our farmers' financial support are Ziraat Bank and some other private banks. We provided YTL 7.3 billion in credit to farmers last year. This number was only YTL 529 million when we came to power. In 2009 alone, we will allocate TL 475 for loan interest payments.

Q.: So there is no crisis?

Eker: The only thing that can cause a crisis in the agricultural sector is drought. Thank God, we have had abundant rainfall so far this year all around the country. This financial crisis won't hit our agricultural sector. Be assured of that.

Sources

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