

The EU-Turkey-Cyprus Triangle: "Setting the Stage"

Hugh Pope

23 February 2009

Turkey has been converging formally with the European Union and its predecessors since it signed an association agreement in 1963, the same year the dispute between Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Turkey and Greece over Cyprus became both a cause and symptom of ups and downs in the EU-Turkey relationship. On the Mediterranean island, armed conflict has been minimal since the 1974 Turkish invasion and occupation of the northern third, and Turkey and Greece have smoothed over their differences since a 1999 rapprochement. But the 2004 entry of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU as a divided country imported this frozen conflict into the heart of Europe, and created an unbreakable triangle between the EU, Turkey and Cyprus.

Within this triangle, 2009 looks set to be a decisive year. Turkey, negotiating for full membership of the EU since 2005, is unable to start negotiations on at least half of the 33 candidacy "chapters" with Brussels due to freezes linked to Cyprus. Since 2007, France has blocked five others, symbolising European enlargement fatigue and reversing its former support for Turkey's EU vocation.

These difficulties have caused a slowdown in the EU reform process in Turkey, already demotivated by a general EU failure to reward Ankara and the Turkish Cypriots for accepting the EU-approved, UN-mediated Annan Plan for a Cyprus settlement in 2004 which the Greek Cypriots rejected. Fall 2009 will cause another blow to Turkey's EU candidacy prospects if Ankara does not normalise its relations with the Republic of Cyprus and EU member states decide to further slow down the accession process. In any event, if nothing changes, Turkey will run out of EU negotiating "chapters" to open by 2010. In short, without some clear forward movement in 2009, EU-Turkey convergence risks grinding to a halt, and with it most likely any hopes of a Cyprus settlement.

In early 2009, Turkey gave evidence of a new will to revive its flagging convergence with the European Union implementing many of the recommendations made by Crisis Group. On 31 December 2008, President Abdullah Gül signed into law a new National Programme for the Adoption of the EU Acquis, formally updating the road map for adopting the EU body of law for the first time since 2003. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan appointed his close associate Egemen Bağış to become a state minister and full-time EU negotiator, taking the portfolio from the busy foreign minister.

On 10 January, he upgraded the status of Turkey's main implementing institution for EU legislation, the EU General Secretariat, from the control of the foreign minister to the prime minister. Erdoğan then visited Brussels on 19 January, his first visit to the EU capital for four years, and pledged that 2009 would see "a leap forward in terms of reforms". Turkey has also indicated that it may not oppose France's return to NATO's military structures. This follows an easing of the French president's formerly strident tone against Turkey.

In January, the government also granted important new ethnic and religious freedoms. A full-time, state-run Kurdish-language television channel began broadcasting, and has proved popular among Turkish Kurds despite a campaign against it by some Kurdish nationalists. The government is also talking of expanding the rights of private Kurdish channels, allowing Kurdish institutes in universities, lifting bans on the letters q, w and x (used in writing Kurdish, but not Turkish) and permitting the use of Kurdish on prison visits. Erdoğan attended a breaking-the-fast dinner of the heterodox Alevi community, state television broadcast programmes dedicated to Alevi holy days and the government started work on giving Alevi prayer leaders the same rights as those enjoyed by the Sunni Muslim mainstream. Parliament started work on changing by-laws to avoid filibusters and speed the legislative reform process.

Delays in the EU reform process are partly caused by domestic polarisation between Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP, or Adalet ve Kalınma Partisi), the newest conservative, religious-minded movement, and the old secular establishment (often known as Kemalists, after republican founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk). The Turkish Armed Forces, which ousted governments in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997, kicked off a new round of tensions in 2007 with a website warning to AKP. Erdoğan saw off that challenge in July 2007 with a 47 per cent win in early parliamentary election.

Then when an arms cache and apparent series of coup plots linked to serving and retired security forces personnel were uncovered after June 2008, the conflict morphed into a court case known as Ergenekon. Blunt judicial methods have resulted in some clearly unjust detentions among the current 86 defendants, who include retired generals. But at its core the case remains deadly serious. One officer committed suicide after being publicly linked to the alleged Ergenekon network and Turkey's dirty war against Kurdish nationalists in the 1990s; his funeral was attended by the country's five top generals.

The European reaction to all this has been muted. The EU is sceptical about Turkey's commitment after the lack of substantial reforms in 2005-2008. In early 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan caused another distraction with tough talk against Israel in Brussels and a walk-off from a stage in the World Economic Forum in Davos. In both places he tried to focus world condemnation on Israeli actions in Gaza, but instead European and American audiences focused on whether the forthright style in which he did it proved that he was an Islamist or that Turkey was turning away from the West. (In fact, nothing

much has changed: although Erdoğan could and should have done much more to head off an anti-Semitic streak in anti-Israel protests in Turkey, Erdoğan has long criticised Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, advocates inclusion of Hamas in peace talks and has never touched Ankara's relatively strong security relationship with Tel Aviv). Erdoğan's eye was doubtless partly on Turkey's 29 March local elections, and one poll showed his popularity rating soared 19 points after his Davos demarche.

A strong AKP showing in the March election might embolden Erdoğan to pursue Turkey's EU reform agenda, which might then trigger some encouragement from the EU and give Erdoğan a freer hand to make bold moves on Cyprus. This will become salient when the current bicomunal negotiations reach a critical juncture involving matters like the 1960 guarantee arrangements involving Turkey and Turkish troop withdrawals.

After five months of full-fledged negotiations, talks between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders are moving consistently ahead. The leaders concluded an initial discussion on governance and power sharing, and started working on property in February. Some areas of agreement have emerged; and the two leaders have retained a long-standing personal friendship and engagement. The two sides still have several months left before there is real pressure to conclude the talks after what is likely to be intensive give and take sessions on outstanding points of disagreement.

One new complication is that the Turkish Cypriots have brought forward parliamentary elections to 19 April from February 2010. (Turkish Cypriot President Mehmet Ali Talat faces separate elections in April 2010). The current coalition government is led by Talat's former party, the pro-settlement Republican Society Party (CTP). Polls show that the nationalist National Unity Party (UBP) is now in the lead, reflecting disillusionment with the slow progress of reunification talks. If the UBP wins Talat may be under pressure to make fewer concessions to a fully federal settlement.