



Event Report

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TURKEY AND THE EU: NEGOTIATIONS, RELATIONS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Breakfast Policy Briefing - 2 March 2007

Summary

Turkey is transforming itself as it looks ahead to EU membership and the reform process is creating “the Turkey of the future”, Ankara’s Chief Negotiator Ali Babacan told an EPC Breakfast Policy Briefing. Following the dispute over Cypriot access to Turkish ports and airports last year, the government is moving ahead with its reform programme based on its own priorities and deadlines, regardless of any formal progress being made in the negotiations.

Full Report

Ali Babacan, Minister of State for Economy and EU Chief Negotiator, began by emphasising the significance of December 2004 - when Turkey was accepted as a candidate for EU membership after more than 40 years of interactions - for both Turkey and the EU.

This marked the beginning of the government’s extensive reform programme, with the passage of eight reform packages so far. Mr Babacan stressed that Turkey’s “ownership” of the reform process was core to its success. While he acknowledged that the country still had a long way to go, he believed that the glass was “more than half full for political reform”; the next stage was implementation.

Over the last 18 months, Turkey had completed the required screening process for membership and was moving forward with a number of chapters in the negotiations. This had transformed the country’s political, economic and social landscape, making it unrecognisable from only a few years ago.

Unfortunately, he said, Turkey-EU relations had reached a difficult stage at the end of 2006. While the “surface” problem was Cyprus, Mr Babacan believed that the real reason was the EU’s preoccupation with domestic issues. Europe was going through difficult times following enlargement, with Member States facing high unemployment, falling competitiveness and social problems surrounding integration.

Turks had been frustrated and disappointed with the EU decision, believing that the dispute over Cyprus “was not big enough” to warrant it. As a result, the government is moving ahead with its reform programme for 2007-2013 based on its own priorities and deadlines, regardless of any formal progress being made in the negotiations. “We can’t let our children drink bacteria-tainted milk, or let our industries pollute the environment,” he insisted. Turkey would carry on with its reforms, which were in line with EU standards and would benefit the country.

Communication to members



Mr Babacan said he hoped that the future climate for Turkish membership would be better when “Europe’s self-confidence returned”.

The government had already received four invitations to open chapters, and the European Commission and the German Presidency were prepared to open four more by the end of June. However, Mr Babacan acknowledged that all 27 Member States had to agree on Turkey’s progress and any of them could veto any chapter at any time.

He stressed again that Turkey had been going through an enormous reform process, bolstered by the prospect of EU membership. No matter how far away the target was, the country was moving towards it “inch by inch and mile by mile”.

Given Turkey’s strategic importance in the region, said Mr Babacan, the EU would benefit from Turkey’s desire to move closer to Europe. Brussels’ goal of becoming more involved in its immediate neighbourhood was “not an easy one”. Given Ankara’s strong historical ties with countries in the region, it could contribute to strengthening EU relations with them.

Turkey’s reform process is being closely followed around the world, particularly in Arab countries, many of which are Muslim. While they do not want to become EU members themselves, they are keenly observing Turkey’s example of building a state in which Islam and democracy can co-exist.

Mr Babacan also insisted that Turkey’s economic future was very bright since it now has a fully-functioning market economy. It has seen consecutive growth for the last four years, single-digit inflation for the first time in 35 years, a doubling of Foreign Direct Investment over the last two years to \$22.5 billion and a doubling of exports over the last four years. The government has already met the Maastricht criteria and its economic progress makes it the ‘envy’ of countries like Germany, Italy and France.

In the energy field, Turkey is moving towards becoming an energy hub and is creating an alternative energy route for gas and oil, making it a global player in energy security.

It is also playing a more visible role in international relations and security issues. As a long-term NATO member, its forces have served in Bosnia, Afghanistan and the Lebanon, and it has supported EU missions, for example, by supplying troops for the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is also one of the few countries, said Mr Babacan, which can do business with both Israel and Arab countries.

He believed that Turkey could play a “balancing role” in international issues, but regretted that this was not yet possible as this chapter in the accession negotiations was currently frozen because of the ‘Cyprus issue’.

He perceived huge differences between the current 27 Member States. When Turkey joined, it would show that it could share and implant values and ideas, and “open the door of dialogue between east and west” and between different religions and cultures.

Turkey’s entry into the EU was not simply about bringing in another member, but about defining how relations within the EU evolved. As all the current Member States would have to decide whether Turkey



should join, it was important to “win the hearts and minds” of all EU citizens. At the same time, the government needed to convince its own people about the value of EU membership.

Discussion

Pressed on the Cyprus issue, Mr Babacan said the Prime Minister had visited many countries to communicate Turkey’s willingness to resolve the dispute. Unfortunately, he said, it appeared that the Greek Cypriots were happy with the status quo, as they were enjoying the benefits of EU membership and making use of structural funds while northern Cyprus remained isolated from the rest of the world. Ankara would like the United Nations to be the third party to work out a comprehensive solution.

Asked whether the army might intervene in the forthcoming elections, Mr Babacan said the political landscape in Turkey was changing. It used to be dominated by the political elite, but was now much more democratic. While there might be “dry noise” from those who had lost their privileges, the government would press on with the democratic agenda.

Questioned about Turkish action to combat climate change, Mr Babacan said 25% of the country’s electricity was already generated by hydro power and a new law gave special privileges to those who invested in wind power. Ankara was also studying the use of nuclear energy plants, given that Turkey had to cut its dependency on imported energy supplies as its economy continued to grow.

Asked whether a Merkel-Sarkozy alliance would affect Turkey’s EU membership bid, Mr Babacan insisted that not a single EU political leader had said Turkey should drop out of the process. This gave the Turkish government the courage to proceed. He added that Turkey seven years hence would be very different from Turkey today. It was the “Turkey of the future” that would become a member.

Questioned on whether the government would reform Article 301 of the Turkish Constitution, he said reforms were easy on paper, but more difficult to implement, as a cultural transformation was needed in the country. He added he was not happy “to see journalists, writers and Nobel Prize winners going backwards and forwards to the courts everyday”, and pointed out that the government has said that Article 301 needed amending.