



EU urges reopening of stalled membership talks with Turkey, despite failures

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The European Commission would like the talks on **Turkey's full EU membership**, frozen for the past three years, to be renewed and greater attention paid to incorporating the issue of fundamental rights into negotiations with the country.



Talks on a **new policy area**, known as a chapter, were due to be opened at the end of last June, but were postponed because of Ankara's excessively brutal handling of demonstrations which rocked the country and particularly appalled Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor. Two weeks of clashes with police left four people dead and about 7,500 injured.

The **protests** began peacefully over the development of Gezi Park, a rare green space near Taksim Square in the heart of Istanbul, and spread to 72 of Turkey's 82 provinces. Initially about the park, the environmental protests turned into demonstrations against the increasing authoritarianism and creeping Islamisation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which has polarised the country. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power since 2002 and in 2011 it won almost 50% of the vote.

Rather than call a halt to **Turkey's accession negotiations**, which began in October 2005 (18 years after applying) and have only seen the completion of one of the 35 chapters, EU countries decided to await the annual survey of Turkey's progress towards meeting EU norms before making any decision about opening a new chapter on regional policy.

Around half of the chapters are either blocked because of French and Cypriot objections or frozen by Brussels because of Ankara's failure to implement the 2005 Ankara Protocol and open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic and hence extend its customs union with the EU (since 1996) and recognise the Republic of Cyprus, an EU country since 2004. Turkey has occupied the northern part of Cyprus since invading the country in 1974.

The keenly awaited **report** criticises the government for its 'uncompromising stance in the face of dissent' and 'its failure to protect fundamental rights and freedoms'. It also objects to 'cross-ownership in the media and intimidating statements by politicians [that] have made self-censorship in the traditional press widespread'. The report makes it clear that Turkey has long way to go to meet EU standards.

According to Dunja Mijatovic, representative for media freedom at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), 67 journalists were behind bars in Turkey last June –the largest number among the body's 57 member states–. This compares with 95 journalists in prison in the 2012 OSCE survey. Many are held under anti-terrorism legislation.

EU governments will consider the report on 22 October and could decide to re-launch the talks in November. While there is no shortage of criticism of Turkey's poor record in rights, particularly from Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, there is also an awareness of the need to keep Turkey on board and for Erdogan to be motivated to look west and not increasingly east.

Now that **Merkel has won the German election** and is to remain Chancellor, though she is struggling to form a new coalition government, there is a greater chance of a more conciliatory stance towards Turkey.

After dragging his feet, Erdogan recently unveiled a package of 'democratisation' reforms including new Kurdish reforms and a reversal of the headscarf ban, a controversial issue which has long pitted supporters of Turkey's secular constitution against those in favour of Islamic rights, particularly pious Muslims, the bedrock of the AKP today. The ending of the ban on women wearing headscarves in public service has been a longstanding goal of Erdogan.

The Prime Minister proposed to lower the 10% electoral threshold (5% in Spain), which makes it difficult for Kurdish and other smaller parties to be represented in parliament. Kurds are estimated to account for around 20% of the population. Education in Kurdish will also be broadened in private schools (not in state ones apparently) and the nationalist oath recited by students at the beginning of each school day will be removed.

The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), however, regarded the reforms as insufficient, pointing out that the anti-terror courts were still working and took a very narrow view of what constituted terrorism. The reforms stopped short of the constitutional guarantees for Kurdish identity and culture, greater autonomy and full native-language education that Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader (since 1999) of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) said in a statement last month were 'the Kurdish people's inalienable demands'. **Ocalan negotiated a ceasefire last March to the insurgency**, that has killed more than 40,000 people, but there is no guarantee it will hold.

The opening of a new chapter needs the support of all EU countries. The **Spanish government is one of the more active** in favour of keeping Turkey on board, a foreign policy issue which cuts across the political divide. Turkey, a huge and booming market, has become Spain's second-largest non-EU export market after the US and the country was the fifth-largest recipient of gross Spanish investment abroad in the first half of this year (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Spanish gross direct investment abroad, first half of 2013, top 10 countries (€ million and % of total) (1)

	€ million	% change 2013/12	% of total
UK	792	+706.5	15.4
Germany	430	+249.7	8.4
Brazil	410	-19.2	8.0
Colombia	389	+834.3	7.6
Turkey	378	+190.1	7.4
El Salvador	371	NA	7.2
Netherlands	364	+25.6	7.1
Italy	244	+1.8	4.8
Luxembourg	228	+221.5	4.4
Switzerland	199	+9,044.4	3.9

(1) Excluding ETVEs.

Source: Foreign Investment Registry.

The most resistant is Cyprus whose relations with Ankara have not improved in recent years, though there is talk of re-launching after a lull of 18 months the long-running negotiations on resolving the dispute over the island divided since a Greek Cypriot coup in 1974 was followed by a Turkish invasion of the north. Turkey is the only country to recognise the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot leaders are due to meet in November on the island.

Resolving the division of Cyprus is not a condition for Turkey's EU membership, though it would create a great deal of goodwill throughout the international community. What Erdogan does need to do is to fully implement the 2005 Ankara protocol and extend its customs union with the EU to Cyprus.

Meanwhile, **support within and outside Turkey for the country's EU membership remains low**. Only 20% of respondents in 11 EU countries are in favour of membership according to the **latest Transatlantic Trends** poll published last month by the German Marshall Fund of the US and the Compagnia di San Paolo. Only 44% (down from 73% in 2004) of Turkish respondents still favoured joining the EU, while 38% said that Turkey should act independently on international matters and 21% said Turkey should cooperate with the EU.

'I've a lot of voices saying we should disengage with Turkey but I take the opposite view', said Stefan Fule, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, after the release of the report. 'We have so many issues of mutual interest but the ball is in Turkey's court'.