



# Turkey Report

No 5

## EU and Turkey: A revitalised relationship?

Turkey-EU relationship has lately dominated Turkey's agenda again. Negotiations have been stalled for two years, 18 out of the 33 Chapters have been blocked and Ankara has already announced that it will boycott the Cyprus presidency of the EU. However, despite the adverse factors, there seems to be a renewed interest from both sides.

In May the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle inaugurated the so-called Positive Agenda, which aims to give a new momentum to the EU-Turkey relations. The Positive Agenda covers eight areas and includes the establishment of working groups with the goal of speeding up efforts to align Turkish policy with EU legislation. "The Positive Agenda is not to replace negotiations but to complement them," the Commissioner has stated several times. The agreement between Turkey and the EU to launch negotiations for the facilitation of visa regulations for the Turkish citizens (on the condition that Turkey signs the readmission agreement) is to be cited among the positive developments, as well.

François Hollande's assuming the French presidency has been welcomed with a cautious optimism by Turkish journalistic and political circles, while the prospective weakening of the German-French axis seems to have revitalised hope on Turkey's part. Egemen Bağış, the minister for EU Affairs, reiterated the Turkish officials' commitment to full membership, saying that "Until now, all countries that have started negotiations with the EU have become full members. Turkey will not be the first exception." Along the same lines, on the occasion of Europe Day, which was celebrated with enthusiasm in Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated, among other things, that, "Turkey's EU membership is an eventual outcome and requirement of the natural flow of history."

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## Is there anything new with the Kurdish issue?

At the end of May the main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), submitted a six-point report to the Speaker of the Parliament. The report proposes the establishment of two commissions, within and outside the framework of the Parliament, which would concentrate on the Kurdish question. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has welcomed CHP's suggestion, while the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has rejected it on the argument that there is no "Kurdish issue" but rather a "terror issue" that should be addressed and accusing the leader of the CHP for being the mouthpiece of Abdullah Öcalan. The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) has also considered the move a positive step. However, the plan has also been criticised for not offering substantive solutions to the problem and not approaching the issue from a holistic point of view.

Some weeks ago Leyla Zana, an independent MP and a legendary figure of the Kurdish movement, expressed the belief that "Erdoğan is the most suitable person to come up with a solution to the Kurdish issue." Her statement has annoyed BDP co-leader, Selahettin Demirtaş, who replied that "whoever thinks Erdoğan can provide a solution is naive." On the 30<sup>th</sup> of June Zana and Erdoğan held a much-anticipated meeting, in which they discussed the Kurdish problem and the reconciliation prospects. AKP's announcement that elective Kurdish language courses will be introduced in the curricula at the second level of education, should there be enough demand (for Kurdish), has received a mixed welcome; although the move has been widely regarded as a positive step forward in the path of democratisation, it has also been criticised for stopping far behind Kurdish people's demands.

The situation in the East and the Southeast remains tense, as both sides have been being involved in a vicious circle of violence. The government has not given up on the traditional security-oriented approach, while PKK attacks against civilians and clashes with the military have been intensified, especially after the Uludere incident (also known as Roboski massacre) in December, when 34 Kurdish villagers were killed in an airstrike by the Turkish Air Forces, mistaken for PKK militants. The fact that the government has not offered a formal apology and that the culprits have not been identified and brought to justice yet deteriorates the situation. At the same time, the KCK operations continue across the country with detentions and arrests of dozens of journalists, academics, BDP officials, lawyers, students, trade unions members and human rights defenders on charges of membership in or aiding and abetting a terrorist organisation (KCK is the Kurdistan Communities Union, the alleged urban wing of the PKK).

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## The constitutional reform and the debate on the presidential system

When it comes to the constitutional reform, there is a broad consensus that the 1982 constitution, enacted under military rule, needs to be replaced by a new charter which would provide expanded freedoms and individual rights, guarantee democracy and the rule of law, grant more political freedoms, respect minorities and normalise the military-civilian relations. A Constitutional Reconciliation Commission has been established to this end, with members from all parliamentary parties. The civil society has also participated actively in the preparation of the articles, the drafting of which started in May.

Within the framework of the constitutional reform process a heated debate has been erupted on whether Turkey's system of government should change from a parliamentary system (or "semi-parliamentary" as it has also been characterised) to a presidential or a semi-presidential. The Prime Minister has openly announced his proposal for the adoption of a presidential system. His proposal has been seconded by several AKP deputies. According to Burhan Kuzu, AKP deputy and head of the Constitutional Reconciliation Commission, Turkey "needs a presidential model since the current model has not proven to be efficient enough in the past," while "the parliamentary system fosters coalitions, which can be detrimental for the country." Supporters of the proposal argue that a stronger executive power would contribute better to Turkey's development.

All opposition parties have rejected the idea of a presidential system. The speculation that a presidential model will be combined with Erdoğan's running for –and most probably becoming– President in 2014 increases the opposition by his political rivals. The political scientist Ersin Kalaycıoğlu has stated on the matter that "Turkey has no problem with its form of government; what needs to be improved is the level of democracy." The risk of authoritarianism and of reduced transparency and accountability in a presidential system has raised further concerns.

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## The debate on abortion

A debate on abortion was brought to the fore by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in late May, when he stated that he is against Caesarean sections, that he considers abortion a murder and that “every abortion is an Uludere,” referring to the incident in Uludere, where 34 civilians were killed mistaken for Kurdish militants. He went on to say that: “I know these are steps taken to prevent this country's population from growing further.” His recent statements seem to be in accordance with AKP's religious-conservative mentality, as well as with the Prime Minister's repeated calls on Turkish families to have a minimum of three children. The statements were followed by a law proposal by the ruling party aiming at decreasing the time up to which abortions can legally be performed from ten to six or four weeks. The Family and Social Policy Minister Fatma Şahin and the Health Minister Recep Akdağ seconded the PM's remarks arguing that “foetuses have also rights.”

Erdoğan's remarks and the ministers' comments have sparked strong reaction and have been condemned by all opposition parties. Women's rights advocates have organised protests, sit-ins and petition campaigns all over the country. Opponents of the proposal have raised concerns that banning or limiting abortion would increase maternal mortality, since women would be pushed to resort to illegal practices or use primitive methods to abort. Many have focused on the cases of pregnancies as a result of rape, as well as on the cases of unwanted pregnancies outside marriage that may lead to stigmatisation of women or to an increase in “honour killings.” The Religious Affairs Director's intervention in support of an abortion ban on religious grounds led to the intensification of the debate. He has been sharply criticised for getting involved in a political debate over which it holds no authority.

On July 4 the Parliament passed an amendment according to which C-sections will be allowed only in cases of medical necessity. It has not been totally clear yet whether AKP will proceed with a bill to restrict abortions when Parliament convenes again after summer recess.

[http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=282685](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=282685)

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