



# BULLETIN

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## The Impact of Turkey's Diplomatic Steps on Its Relations with the EU

by Adam Szymański

*In the current year, Turkey undertook many diplomatic initiatives to further the pre-accession process. With this aim in mind there were numerous visits of Turkish representatives in EU countries and of European politicians in Ankara. Although these visits will not change the unfavourable attitude of some EU members toward Turkey's accession, they could nevertheless create favourable conditions for membership negotiations. This will most probably not be enough to accelerate the talks, given Turkey's internal and external problems.*

In the last few years, Turkey has been tightening its relations with Russia and its Middle Eastern neighbours—Iran, Iraq and Syria. It did not cease, however, to accord priority status to relations with the EU. This year, Turkey took diplomatic steps to stimulate the process of accession negotiations. During the last few months, leading Turkish politicians have been meeting with representatives of the European Commission and of EU member countries that are important in Turkey's viewpoint. Since February 2010, Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has visited Spain, Great Britain and France. Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, met in Ankara with Greece's Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dimitris Droutsas. During this meeting, it was decided that Prime Minister Erdoğan would travel to Athens in May. Ankara's diplomatic steps also involved Poland—the Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and its chief negotiator, Egemen Bağış, visited Warsaw toward the end of March. In turn, representatives of Germany travelled to Turkey—the Minister of Foreign Affairs Guido Westerwelle (in January) and Chancellor Angela Merkel (in March). The EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, also visited Ankara in March.

**The Meaning of the Visits.** The aims of the Turkish steps differ depending on their addressee. In the case of those EU countries favouring Turkish accession (such as Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom) the aim is to maintain that support, thus Turkish politicians assured their hosts that efforts made to reach the ultimate goal—UE membership—would be continued. In addition to this, Turkey is interested in getting proponents of Turkish accession, especially countries that hold or will hold the presidency of the EU Council in the near future, to support negotiations directly. Another aim is indirect support, such as countering Turkey's stereotypical image, which is an obstacle in its progress toward EU membership. The leaders of countries favouring Turkish accession reiterated their support and offered their assistance. Commissioner Füle pronounced himself in similar vein.

Meetings with representatives of countries that are opposed to Turkish membership (such as France and Germany) or voice reservations (Greece) have a different purpose. Turkish attempts to incline such countries to alter their position have not been successful. Chancellor Merkel's visit in Ankara and President Erdoğan's in Paris have confirmed that Germany and France continue to favour the undefined "privileged partnership" rather than Turkish membership. This state of affairs is not altered by the German Chancellor's assurances—dictated by the need to take into account the position of her FDP coalition partner—about the need to respect the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (accompanied by the stressing that the outcome of the negotiations is an open question). Also without any greater importance is the somewhat gentler tone in the recent pronouncements of Nicolas Sarkozy, who had been avoiding any mention of the privileged partnership due to Erdoğan's visit and the desire to maintain proper relations with Turkey. Following those two meetings, one can even speak of a rapprochement between the French and German positions. Neither country is opposed to the continuation of the accession negotiations, but they are both rather inclined to build

a special partnership with Turkey, one including negotiation areas that do not predetermine accession (i.e., with the omission of key areas such as agricultural, economic or monetary policy).

Through those visits, Turkey wishes to improve the climate in mutual relations—a factor that also plays a role in the attitude of EU member states toward the Turkish candidacy. This is possible, on the one hand, through the tightening of relations in areas in which there is a concordance of interests. The meetings of Turkish politicians with representatives of France, Germany and Greece have confirmed the importance of mutual economic contacts above all—such as the energy sector, infrastructure projects, transport and telecommunications—and constituted an opportunity to discuss their development prospects. On the other hand, the improvement of the climate was to be served by the stressing during the meetings of the desire to resolve contentious issues. In Turkish-French relations, the main problem is the negative image the French have of Turks. Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit in Paris took place at the close of the Turkish Season in France made up of about 600 cultural events that were intended to improve Turkey's image. Chancellor Merkel's stay in Ankara provided an opportunity for rapprochement on the issues of the integration of Turkish immigrants in Germany and visas for Turkish entrepreneurs, students, scholars and artists. Misunderstandings connected with the education of Turkish youth in Germany were resolved and the German Chancellor did not rule out granting long term visas to persons from the above-mentioned groups. Reaching an understanding on strategic partnership during President Erdoğan's visit in Athens could contribute to the easing of territorial disputes. It will also help resolve the issue of the rights of the Greek minority in Turkey and the Turkish minority in Greece, which also influence accession negotiations negatively.

**Turkey's Internal and External Problems.** Turkey will take advantage of the improvement of relations with countries that oppose its accession as well as the fact that France and Germany do not oppose the continuation of talks, in order to stimulate the EU membership negotiations. This could prove difficult, however, given Turkey's unresolved internal and external problems.

Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) is preparing a package of constitutional changes. If they aren't the effect of an understanding between Turkey's many political forces, they will not meet the EU's expectations, however. In the event, any referendum would be, in effect, a plebiscite of support for the AKP. In addition, the package in its present form—in addition to important changes, like the introduction of the institution of an ombudsman—contains controversial changes that could, among other things, excessively strengthen executive power at the cost of the judicial branch. Moreover, the proposed changes do not take into account the EU's calls to reduce the 10% electoral threshold and to respect freedom of speech and the rights of religious minorities.

Chances for the resolution of the Cyprus question and the problem of normalization of relations with Armenia—both very important for progress on the accession negotiations—are slight. Turkey continues to refuse to open its ports and airports to ships and airplanes from the Republic of Cyprus. It points to the fact that the EU has not lived up to its obligation to end the economic isolation of the northern part of Cyprus. This means that it remains impossible to open eight negotiation chapters or close any of 34 areas. A positive conclusion of talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders on the subject of the island's reunification—talks that have been going on since September 2008—would be helpful. So far, they have not produced any results, and their continuation looks uncertain, as the April presidential election in the northern part of Cyprus was won by Derviş Eroğlu, the opponent of the former leader of the Turkish Cypriots, Mehmet Ali Talat. Eroğlu is less inclined to compromise than Talat and he favours the creation of a confederation.

The rapid ratification by Turkey and Armenia of two protocols—concluded in Zurich in October 2009—concerning the establishment and development of diplomatic relations between the two countries, seems improbable. Turkey, given its relations with Azerbaijan, makes the ratification conditional on the adoption of a solution to the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh that would be acceptable to the Azeri side. Although the Armenian Constitutional Tribunal recognized the protocols' concordance with the Armenian Constitution, it raises the question of the recognition as genocide of the Armenian massacres of 1915–16. Ratification of the two documents is not made any easier by the resolutions recently adopted by the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs and by the Swedish Parliament. The two resolutions refer to the massacres as genocide, something that has stiffened Turkey's position on the issue of an understanding with Armenia.

The above-mentioned questions' unresolved status places EU proponents of Turkish accession in a difficult situation, as it makes it effectively impossible for them to argue the case for Turkish membership. In turn, it gives countries opposing Turkey's accession strong arguments in support of their position—arguments which had also been clearly voiced during the recent visits (especially in relation to the question of Cyprus). Poland should be guided by the principle of equal treatment for all EU membership candidates and continue to support Turkey's aspirations.