

THE DANISH PRESIDENCY AND TURKEY'S EU ACCESSION: TURNING THE PAGE TOWARDS NEW POSITIVE AGENDA

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The 2012 Danish presidency term of the Council of the European Union (EU) launched the 'Positive Agenda' policy with regards to Turkey's EU accession process, intending to bring new momentum to the stalled negotiation talks. While the practical outcomes of this policy is to be determined, as no new chapters have yet been opened, the Danish presidency contributed to changing attitudes vis-à-vis Turkey's EU accession by – at least symbolically – advancing the negotiation talks between the EU and Turkey. Further, at a bilateral level, the initiative coming during the Danish presidency showed the desire and determination of Denmark to bring bilateral relations with Turkey back on track.

This paper will touch upon developments in bilateral relations between Denmark and Turkey and the conditions for Turkey's accession process to the EU in light of the 2012 Danish presidency. While Danish-Turkish relations have been hurt by recent events, such as the political disputes over freedom of speech and the press surrounding the Cartoon Controversy and the Roj TV Affair, at the same time Turkey's stalled negotiation talks with the EU amid freedom of expression issues, human rights concerns, and the unsolved Cyprus dispute have not effectively moved forward since 2010. As a result, the six-months Denmark presidency, preceding the Republic of

Cyprus during the second half of 2012, has both demonstrated willingness for closer dialogue and continued EU integration of Turkey and given a genuine gesture towards improved bilateral ties.

Denmark-Turkey Relations: Recent Developments

While the history of Denmark-Turkey ties can be traced back to the 18th century with the start of mutual trade (Dirik, 2011), recent developments have shown the need for a fresh start in bilateral relations. During the past decade, mutual relations between the two countries have been strained at times, where the two most cited examples are the events of the Danish Cartoon Controversy (2005-06) and the Roj TV Affair (2005).

In relation, the Danish public opinion towards Turkey's EU accession has not been entirely supportive. Firstly, this corresponds to the broad skepticism amongst Danes towards EU integration in general. Since entering the European Community in 1972, Denmark has held a critical position towards an ever closer union, which has been expressed by, for instance, the choice to stand outside of EU's common defense policies, the economic and monetary union, and juridical cooperation (Jung, 2010, p. 2). Particularly regarding political integration, Copenhagen is also careful not

to participate in EU policy decisions without the support of the Danish people (Jung, 2010, p. 2). Secondly, the lack of support for Turkey's EU accession amongst the Danes chiefly stems from the view that Turkey is a Middle Eastern, rather than European, country – a skepticism that links to the fierce public debate on migration in general, and Islam in particular, in Denmark (Jung, 2008, p. 103), and to cultural stereotypes and concerns about “the lack of democratic values” in Turkey's domestic sphere (Jung, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, the perception has been that Turkey is moving further away from the EU due to the country's more active foreign policy in the Middle East; on the flip side, this perception has been portrayed in the Danish media as a result of the EU's rather uncaring policies towards Turkey (Herschend Christoffersen, 2010). Though regarding Denmark-Turkey bilateral relations alone, in particularly two events in the last decade triggered a long-lasting political dispute and negative image between the two countries.

The Cartoon Controversy

Denmark-Turkey relations became a sensitive topic following the publication by Denmark's largest daily newspaper *Jyllandsposten* of twelve now infamous caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in September 2005. What started off as a debate over freedom of speech and a sudden provocation of Muslims in Denmark soon grew into a political crisis insulting Muslim populations internationally (Jung, 2010, p. 5). Turkey, being one amongst other Muslim-majority countries, spoke out to protest the publication and denounce the indignity carried out under what was labeled “freedom of speech” (Dirik, 2011). Together with eleven Muslim states in the Middle East and elsewhere, Turkish leaders called for an official

apology from the then Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen on the moral offence caused by the controversy, in which Muslims were misleadingly portrayed as people sympatric to terrorist activity (Dirik, 2011). The controversy peaked with Rasmussen's response, in which he turned down a request to meet with the countries' ambassadors, saying it would violate the freedom of speech principle (Jung, 2010, p. 5). Instead on the acts of Turkey, Rasmussen sent a warning to Ankara, which stated, “[w]e are faced with some true matters of principle [...] Turkey as a society should realize that there are certain condition[s] to fulfill if it one day wants to become a member of the European Union” (UPI, 2005).

The Roj TV Affair

Another bilateral dispute came with the Danish-Turkish controversy over closing the Copenhagen-based Roj TV, a Kurdish channel with believed links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is labeled as a terrorist organization by for instance Turkey and the EU. Emphasizing the channel's alleged links to terrorist activity, Turkey had long pushed for Denmark to withdraw its broadcasting permit. The controversy peaked when Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refused to participate in a press conference because a Roj TV reporter was present at the event. Following this incident, the US government interfered and called for Denmark to ban Roj TV, but any action to do so from the Danish side came only after it was announced in 2006 that former Prime Minister Rasmussen was to be appointed NATO Secretary General. The decision was due to Turkey's warnings that it would veto Rasmussen's NATO appointment because of his refusal to apologize over the Cartoon Controversy (Dirik, 2011). In a statement on the political

outrage related to the Roj TV dispute, the then Danish ambassador to Turkey Anders Christian Hoppe acknowledged, “the Roj TV affair is not something that helps to improve relations” (Hoppe, quoted in Dirik, 2011).

The events of both the Roj TV Affair and the Cartoon Controversy rather exemplify the ways in which Danish-Turkish relations have been strained over issues to do with freedom of speech and the press, which fall under the Copenhagen political criteria. As argued by Dietrich Jung, professor at the University of Southern Denmark, these events showed that “Danish public opinion reacts extremely sensitive[ly] to any restrictions of civil liberties”, in turn indicating some of the core obstacles for Turkey to adhere to the Copenhagen criteria (Jung, 2010, p. 5; Jung 2008, p. 113). To this end, Denmark has reiterated that it is up to Turkey to comply with the Copenhagen criteria and with European standards before it can be allowed accession (Jung, 2010, p. 3).

Turkey’s EU Accession and the Danish Presidency

At the same time, the accession process of Turkey to the EU has to a large degree stagnated over the last decade. Stated in the EU Commission’s Progress Report from 2002, the range of fundamental reforms implemented in Turkey following its candidate status in 1999, such as the constitutional reform in October 2001 and the New Civil Code and reform packages in 2002, showed the willingness of most Turkish leaders to move closer towards the Union’s standards (EU, European Commission, 2002, p. 137). Although these reforms were considered major leaps forward, the Commission emphasized that in order to overcome its obstacles adhering to the Copenhagen political criteria “Turkey is

encouraged to pursue the reform process to strengthen democracy and the protection of human rights” (EU, European Commission, 2002, p. 139). For instance, during the previous Danish EU presidency of 2002, “the Turkish issue” was especially tasking due to diverse preferences from the EU member states, and Turkey’s problem to adhere to the EU standards of democracy, human rights, including minority rights, and the rule of law, all of which falls under the Copenhagen political criteria (Laursen & Laursen, 2003, p. 15).

Throughout the beginning of 2000, that is the more active period in Turkey’s accession process, the EU Progress Reports were largely seen as guidance for Turkey to make legal and political reforms in line with European standards. Yet, the EU Commission soon continued a less active approach towards Turkey’s accession. According to İlke Toygür, researcher at the Economic Development Foundation in Istanbul, as concerns rose over the lack of a solution to the Cyprus issue, which led to the blocking of eight negotiation chapters, and adding the French politicians’ blocking of four more chapters, the “ambiguous messages of the European Commission embodied in the progress reports started to lose effectiveness” (Toygür, 2011). As recognized in the 2011 Progress Report on Turkey, “[t]he prevailing political climate, lacking an adequate dialogue [...]; this atmosphere hampered the continuation of the reform process” (EU, European Commission, 2011, p. 5).

However, today there is a strong interest from the EU-side to keep Turkey on the European track, not least due to Turkey’s role as a critical trading partner with the EU and as a powerful player regionally (EU, 2012). As a result, Danish Ministers have promised to restart Turkey’s accession negotiations to the EU. Concerning the current status of Turkey’s accession

process is 13 out of the 35 *acquis communautaire* chapters that must align with the EU standards have been opened, 17 blocked, and only one, the Science and Research Chapter, temporarily closed (Today's Zaman, 2012b). In May 2012, Danish Foreign Minister Willy Søvndal said "[t]here are many in the Danish parliament who support improving political ties with Turkey, meaning that we can take on the role of 'bridge builder' in the final stage of our presidency" (Søvndal, quoted in Stanners, 2012). As part of their enlargement priority of the Danish presidency, Danish ministers point to the importance to keep Turkey (alongside Balkan states) on the EU track, which in turn "will help these countries in their efforts for reform" (Stanners, 2012).

On this background the EU Commission launched the Positive Agenda policy with regards to Turkey's candidacy, hoping to bring a new start to the stalled negotiation process. According to Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, "[t]he positive agenda is a bridge, but not above or around the accession negotiations. It is a bridge leading towards them" (EU, 2012b). Thus by the EU, the approach is considered a chance to "establish the framework to integrate a number of key aspects of our relationship and to approach them in positive spirit based on dialogue and openness" (EU, 2012b). Similarly, Danish Minister for European Affairs Nicolai Wammen, on his visit to Turkey in June 2012, said that he is pleased that the new, positive context in terms of Turkey-EU relations has been achieved during the time of the Danish presidency (EU, 2012c). On the Turkish side, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has admitted that hopes are high to overcome the period of frozen talks: "We expect the Danish rotating presidency to play a leading role in over-

coming this decades-long problem" (Davutoğlu, quoted in Stanners, 2012). Exactly how those expectations are likely to play out in reality remains to be determined in the period ahead, post-the Danish presidency.

Turning the Page Towards New Positive Agenda

As Denmark hands over the EU presidency to the Republic of Cyprus on July 1, the Positive Agenda achieved by Denmark has not led to rapid developments. Ankara has previously stated that they will suspend the negotiation talks and pause any dialogue with the EU during the Cyprus presidency in the second half of 2012 as Turkey does not recognize the Greek Cypriot government (Today's Zaman, 2012b). But the Positive Agenda was brought on to prevent a possible frozen-talks scenario; indeed Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator Egemen Bağış later credited the Positive Agenda with the capacity to keep the relations going and said it will help Turkey bypass potential future problems with the EU (Anadolu Agency, 2012). Although the Positive Agenda likely prevented the worsening of the relations with the EU Commission, European Parliament political analyst Ali Yurttagül rightly noted that "a Danish term presidency in the months before a Cypriot term presidency is not in a position to either re-enliven the accession talks or place new cornerstones in general Turkish policies" (Yurttagül, 2012). Moreover, before handing over the presidency to Cyprus, Denmark only had limited time for actual progress due to the French elections in May 2012: prior to the elections, negotiations were stalled because of the Cyprus dispute and French opposition to the Turkish EU bid (Today's Zaman, 2012b). Ultimately, this gave a narrow one month to reach change for

Denmark. Although there were hopes about another chapter (the last one opened in 2010) to open with Denmark in the EU lead, the practical outcome of the positive agenda is likely to wait at least until next year. Hence, the Danish presidency can be credited 'only' with the first positive development in Turkey's accession process in over a decade.

While the Danish presidency has encouraged a more positive attitude on Turkey's EU accession process, Danish leaders also stressed the steps still needed to be taken by Turkey. On his remarks on the Positive Agenda achievement towards the end of the Danish presidency, Minister Wammen stated the need for future improvements from the Turkish side, not least with regards to "the importance that the EU attaches to fundamental rights issues, freedom of expression and freedom of the press as well as minority rights" (EU, 2012c). He further noted that "as long as the Cyprus conflict is not solved and Turkey does not recognise Cyprus, there will continue to be obstacles along the way before the enlargement negotiations can get the momentum they deserve" (EU, 2012c).

Even so, the efforts of the Danish presidency has signified a symbolic step in the desire to keep Turkey on the EU track, at the same time contributing to improved bilateral ties. While there may be a long way ahead before Turkey fulfills the Copenhagen political criteria and grants an upgraded EU status, the Danish presidency has been able to show the willingness from the EU side to continue cooperation and an open, frank dialogue. At the same time, the EU presidency provided a forum for Denmark to demonstrate a more politically positive attitude towards Turkey in light of earlier negative developments such as the events of the Cartoon Controversy and the Roj TV Affair. As noted by Yurttagül, "the

positive and constructive stances adopted by the new Danish government must be taken seriously by Ankara" (Yurttagül, 2012), and would be in the right place to improve bilateral ties between the two countries. Even though no new chapters were added to the open negotiation talks between Turkey and the EU during the first half of 2012, Denmark managed to turn the page towards a new, positive agenda at both the regional and the bilateral level.

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