EU in crisis over Turkish membership

Justus Leicht
18 October 2005

Negotiations for Turkey's accession to the European Union began officially on October 3. The diplomatic wrangling in the run-up to these negotiations and the implications of Turkish membership show clearly that the EU represents neither the genuine unification of Europe nor a social and democratic project.

Right up to the last minute, it remained unclear whether the accession negotiations had actually begun. It was said Turkey had not "completely" fulfilled all the criteria necessary for full membership but had "sufficiently" met entry requirements to justify beginning negotiations.

In the end, the main point of dispute was the signing and implementation of the "Ankara Protocol," which initiates the EU Customs Union with Turkey, usually applied to all new member states. This also includes divided Cyprus, which is not recognised diplomatically by Turkey. Ankara only recognises the "Turkish Republic of North Cyprus" and signed up with the express reservation that this did not signify diplomatic acknowledgment of the status of Cyprus, which the Turkish authorities insists can only take place once there is a political solution to the dispute over the island. Although Turkey and Turkish Cypriots last year accepted a UN plan, it failed to pass a referendum in the Greek area of southern Cyprus.

Despite signing the protocol, the Turkish government is refusing to open up its ports and airports for travel to and from Cyprus. Ankara is demanding the EU first lift the trade embargo against North Cyprus and release the promised financial assistances for the Turkish enclave. Moreover, the protocol has not yet been ratified by the Turkish parliament. The implementation of the protocol and diplomatic recognition of Cyprus are supposed to take place as part of the entry process.

After the compromises had been found, it was not Cyprus or Greece that then blocked accession negotiations at the last minute, but Austria. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, from the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), suddenly insisted that EU membership should no longer form part of the negotiations; instead, Turkey should be considered for "favoured nation" status. This was met with intense bitterness in Turkey, since last December the same Austrian government had supported all the resolutions on starting accession negotiations.

Right-wing circles in Turkey are exploiting the situation to whip up nationalist tendencies. The fascist MHP was able to mobilise a demonstration of more than 50,000 on the weekend before October 3. After being led around by the nose for so long, opposition parties and many well-known media commentators are calling for Turkey to break off relations with the EU. At the same time, the telephone lines between Turkey, the British EU presidency and the government in Vienna are white-hot. At Ankara's request, the US administration has also become involved. In a deliberate affront to the Europeans, the Turkish foreign ministry later expressly thanked Washington for its support.

However, the Austrian government was by no means the only one to display such opposition. It received support from conservative newspapers, church leaders and politicians throughout Europe, and in particular in Germany and France. Apart from the unconcealed chauvinism of those calling for a defence of the "Christian identity of the Occident," opponents of Turkish entry claim that accommodating Turkey, with its 70 million inhabitants, almost 40 percent of whom work in very backward agriculture, would make excessive financial demands of the EU.

According to estimates by the Dresdner Bank, immediately after the country was granted full membership and to alleviate merely the worst shortcomings in agriculture and infrastructure, Brussels would have to transfer almost €14 billion per year to Ankara. In the following years, based on the past financial aid system, this amount could rise to €22-€28 billion annually. By comparison, the 2004-to-2006 budget only designates assistance totalling €40 billion to the 10 new EU members in eastern Europe. And the EU budget for 2007 to 2013 is already being fiercely opposed.

In the end, Austria did not press ahead with its proposal for "favoured nation" status. But on Vienna's insistence, the first paragraphs of the negotiation treaty now include, "The common aim of the negotiations is accession [to the EU]. These negotiations are an open process, whose outcome cannot be guaranteed in advance. This process will include all the Copenhagen criteria, including the capacity of the union [to accept new members]."

Moreover, it has been agreed that the burden of taking on new states is to be shared "fairly" by all members. This is particularly directed against the "British rebate" (the UK's multibillion-pound EU budget rebate).

The implications are clear: Either Turkey accepts that the price of entry means swallowing wide-ranging exceptions and that it will have to go without much agrarian and structural aid, or the country's accession will be used to abolish—completely or substantially—the past system of EU financial supports. Probably, both will occur. Several EU member states have already made clear they will not agree to further annual charges of billions of euros to subsidise Turkish agriculture.

The question remains, why did Austria so vehemently change its position at the last minute? Many observers suspect that Schüssel may have had quite distinct objectives in mind. In March, the EU

© World Socialist Web Site

suspended accession negotiations with Croatia because Zagreb is still not co-operating with the UN War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague. The chief prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, has criticised the Croatian government for continually refusing to hand over former general Ante Gotovina, who is held responsible for the murder and expulsion of large numbers of Serbs during the war in Yugoslavia.

She expressed her "disappointment" on October 1 that Gotovina was still in liberty. Within three days, del Ponte made a U-turn and suddenly declared that Croatia had been cooperating with the war crimes tribunal "completely, for some weeks." At the same time, she insisted she was not being put under pressure. A little later, Gotovina, who is still at liberty, announced via his lawyer that he had no intention of answering the charges in The Hague.

The Austrian government has leaned considerably towards Croatia and against Turkey, principally for economic reasons. It has also been supported in this by the ruling Christian Social Union (CSU) in neighbouring Bavaria. Like Wolfgang Schüssel, Ivo Sanander, the right-wing Croatian government leader, is a regular guest at CSU party congresses. Sanander, whose party conducted the Yugoslav war under the now deceased president Franjo Tudjman, driving out hundreds of thousands of Serbs from Croatia and murdering many, is considered a close friend of CSU leader Edmund Stoiber and studied at Innsbruck in Austria.

The conservative Austrian *Presse* newspaper commented that the "deal" finally produced was "in Austria's interest: "The positioning [of Austria] as Croatia's attorney and thus of the European perspective of southeast Europe strengthens Austria's role in the region and serves as perfect preparation for the West Balkans initiative, which Austria is planning for its EU presidency [in 2006]. What applies with regard to the EU, applies even more strongly to Austria's bilateral weight in the region. And that should considerably strengthen the substantial economic interests that Austrian enterprises have in south-east Europe." Germany's conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* expressed itself in similar fashion.

The *Wiener Kurier* added, "At a meeting of EU foreign ministers to be held on March 10 and 11, 2006, in Salzburg, Austria's foreign minister Ursula Plassnik wants to pilot the young republics into Europe. 'That is an important signal. The problems in the Balkans remain by far unresolved,' according to former vice-chancellor Erhard Busek (ÖVP). The special coordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe has high expectations of the Austrian presidency. 'It would be important to better coordinate the various EU aid programmes.' More stress should also be placed on the fight against corruption."

The plans for a "West Balkans initiative" conceal substantial economic interests. According to *Stern* magazine, a study by the Vienna Institute for Economic Research (WIFO) found that Austria had invested €18.6 billion in the central European countries, of which €14.1 billion went to eight of the new EU members. The alpine state, which is smaller than Bavaria, has a 15 percent share of foreign investment in this region, making it one of the largest single investors. Austria's share of foreign investment in the eight new EU member states is 23.2 percent (with a 30 percent investment share in Slovenia). In 1998, Austria's share of foreign investment was merely 3.1 percent.

Austria is the largest investor in Croatia. The interim Energy Community Secretariat (iECS) is seeking to bring about a uniform energy market in southeast Europe. The most important aims are the construction of an alternative gas supply for the EU via Turkey, as well as the development of a gas supply network in the region—naturally, under the auspices of energy companies such as RWE, Eon, and Kaerntner Kelag. The secretariat, which is financed by the European Commission, has its headquarters in Vienna and is led by Austria's Ministry for Economics and Labour (BMWA).

Austria is at the same time championing German interests. A study by the Berlin Science and Politics foundation concludes, "In the long-term, southeast Europe can be regarded as a development region with massive growth potential, particularly when compared to its level of development at the end of the 1980s. The western Balkans has 24.7 million inhabitants with unmet consumer needs and a relatively high education. If Bulgaria and Romania are included in this extended southeast region, this encompasses almost 56 million consumers. The delayed modernisation of the region's outdated industry necessarily requires capital investments, which the German engineering industries are more than capable of supplying."

Moreover, there is its "bridging role in regard to Turkey and the Middle East." However, the study sees problems with "legal insecurities and corruption" in the region, and furthermore in the "delayed economic reforms, above all in ailing medium and large-scale enterprises, which largely remain as state property." And thirdly, "bureaucratic obstacles and regulations" presently "deter investors." As an example, Croatia's labour legislation is cited, which offers wide-ranging protection for those in permanent employment.

The accession of individual countries such as Croatia, in which warlords like Ante Gotovina enjoy hero status in nationalist circles because of his alleged crimes against the Serbs, would isolate Serbia and other countries politically and economically, and intensify conflicts in the Balkans.

Despite previous EU resolutions, the fact that Austria was able to extort almost two dozen EU members in favour of its Croatian protégé shows Europe's weakness and division. The proponents of Turkish EU membership, such as Germany, differ little with Vienna. Quite the contrary—while the Austrian government sees Croatia as an outpost to control the Balkans, Turkey's political godfathers in Berlin and Washington see Turkey as an outpost to control the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In either case, human rights and economic development are not considered an issue.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site