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Further distance between EU and Turkey might jeopardise PKK-Turkish government talks

Eurocrisis in the Press

By [Zeynep Kaya](#)



The short-term fate of [EU-Turkey accession talks](#) will be determined with the publication of the European Commission's Progress Report on Turkey on the 23 October 2013. The Turkish government's latest democratisation package will be central to the assessment made by this report. However, the [democratisation package](#) seems to be failing to satisfy many sections of Turkish society, especially the Kurds, and therefore might jeopardise ongoing negotiations between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish government.

The Progress Report is significant because it will determine whether or not the EU will reopen discussions on Turkey's accession. After a long negotiation process that started in 1963, Turkey was recognized as a candidate member in 1999. Having gained candidate member status, Turkey embarked on a reform process to fulfil the required criteria for accession. It went through a process of rapid constitutional change and implemented many reforms between 1999 and 2004, notably in the areas of promoting gender equality, abolishing the death penalty, reducing violence against women and children, protecting freedom of expression and the press, protecting the independence of the judiciary, and expanding cultural rights. Initially these reforms led to very optimistic predictions about Turkey's entry. However, after 2004, the pace of the reforms slowed and the degree of implementation of the new reforms remained limited. The Turkish government cannot be solely blamed for the suspension of accession talks, but its lack of willingness to continue with its reform agenda and its inability to ensure full implementation of the new laws had a big impact on the negotiations. Yet other issues also arose in the course of the candidacy process that undermined progress. Turkey perceived the EU as unable or unwilling to deliver on its promises regarding the accession talks, the sovereign debt crisis in Europe increased Turkey's confidence in its own economy, and Cyprus's veto led to the suspension of EU-Turkey negotiations in 2010. Lastly, in the mid-2000s Turkey began to shift its foreign policy focus and attempted to play a leading role in Middle Eastern politics. Combined these factors gradually led to a weakening of interest on the Turkish side in becoming a member of the EU.

The reopening of accession talks was scheduled to take place on the 26 June 2013, however Germany, supported by Austria and Netherlands, requested that these talks be postponed until after the publication of the report on Turkey's progress in October 2013. The reason Germany offered for this delay was the Turkish police's attack on anti-government protests in June of this year. Following this, EU foreign ministers at a General Affairs Council decided that the accession talks might not take place if the progress report is [not satisfactory](#).

The previous year's EU Progress Report advised Turkey to increase transparency in its democratic and participatory processes, to make further efforts with regard to the independence, impartiality and efficiency of the judiciary, and to strengthen human rights structures. The Report expressed concern about the number of criminal proceedings brought against human rights activists and the claims of excessive use of force by the authorities. It pointed to an increase in violations of freedom of expression and restrictions on press freedom, as well as the abuses of ambiguous and broad legal definition of what constitutes organized crime and

terrorism. According to what has already been leaked to the media, the expected democratization package will make enough progress to satisfy EU officials in some of these areas but not all. [Expected changes](#) include removing restrictions on religious minorities and their schools, abolishing the ban on wearing the head-scarf in public institutions, permitting schooling in a language other than Turkish in independent schools if at least ten pupils choose that option. Yet these changes are unlikely to substantially improve the status of human rights and the independence of the judiciary and media. The parliamentary opposition criticise the government for preparing the package behind closed doors without consulting other parties. In response, the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party), states that the package is intended to provide a framework for an ensuing debate on the details of the proposed changes. Another concern is the substantial lack of trust about the extent to which these changes will be implemented in an un-biased manner, free from government meddling.

The area that seems to remain most neglected in the democratisation package is the Kurdish issue. The government has been in negotiation with Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, since the start of 2013. In the course of these negotiations, the government made some concessions and promises to Kurdish nationalists in order to secure a ceasefire in a bid to end the 30-year conflict between the PKK and Turkish armed forces. The content of the democratisation package will be influential in determining whether these negotiations will continue apace or not. The co-presidents of the Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), Selahattin Demirtaş, Gülten Kışanak and Hasip Kaplan, have repeatedly claimed that the government has failed to keep its promises on [a range of issues](#), including allowing education in Kurdish dialects, releasing KCK detainees (Group of Communities in Kurdistan – the urban organization of the PKK) held under anti-terrorism legislation, and reducing the election threshold. In response to the perceived failures of the government, the PKK stopped the withdrawal of its fighters from Turkish territories [last month](#). More recently, the BDP's Hasip Kaplan made a series of dismissive statements, arguing that the reform package will only offer cosmetic changes rather than dealing with areas where substantial change is required and criticising the government for ignoring [his party's proposals](#).

Clearly many of the democratisation reforms will have a direct impact on the Kurdish issue. The AKP government is reluctant to make too many concessions to Kurdish groups for fear of alienating Turkish nationalist and conservative votes, particularly in light of upcoming local and general elections. There is also no denying a sense of fatigue within the Turkish government towards meeting the demands of the accession process. EU membership appears to have become less important to the AKP over time. A democratisation package that falls short of satisfying the European Commission will lead to a critical progress report and further delay the accession talks. In these circumstances, it is hard to see how any progress will be made on the [Turkish accession](#) process in the upcoming months. This may only serve to pull Brussels and Ankara further apart as well as hastening a decline in the prospects of the Turkish-PKK peace talks.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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