



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

There is no hope for Sweden's entry into NATO before presidential elections in Turkey



Sweden's entry into NATO is at an impasse after a far-right politician burned a Quran during a protest in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm last Saturday.

Until then, the prospects for Turkish support for Sweden's application for NATO membership were slim, but the anti-Islamic protests and the burning of the Holy Book were the last straw that prevented Sweden's admission, at least for a while.

Since May last year, when Sweden, along with Finland, officially requested admission to NATO, the process has been proceeding smoothly and rapidly. Members of the Alliance have accepted the wish of two developed Scandinavian democracies to join them.

Their big turn from the traditional policy of neutrality towards NATO membership was accelerated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. They felt unsafe in their immediate neighbourhood, and, with significant public support, requested entry into NATO as a guarantee of their security.

The rapid path to membership was hindered from the outset by Hungary and Turkey. Budapest has loosened its opposition in the meantime, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced that the parliament could soon verify their membership.

In Ankara, however, opposition is growing. After last year's tripartite agreement with Finland and Sweden, which appeared to be a path to a compromise, the situation has become tough again, at least in the case of Sweden.

Turkey is asking too much

On the first business day in January, a constitutional amendment came into force, by which Sweden made it possible to restrict freedom of association for groups that engage in terrorism, which was one of Turkey's main demands.

However, the far-right protest this weekend in

front of the Turkish embassy brought things to a standstill. The new right-wing government in Stockholm said that Turkey is "asking too much".

"Turkey both confirms that we have done what we said we would do, but they also say that they want things that we cannot or do not want to give them", said the Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, at the security conference last week.

In the case of Sweden and partially Finland, the Turkish government and President Erdoğan have been abusing their right of veto in order to resolve bilateral disputes with some members.

Ankara, as a long serving and one of the most influential NATO members, has enough blackmail potential to tighten some strategic decisions of the Alliance, which has also been the case here. But it is not realistic that its resistance will last indefinitely.

Erdoğan will maintain tension towards Sweden until May 14 and the presidential elections, where he will face strong competition and an uncertain race for a new mandate.

Keeping a hard position towards Sweden, from which he demands full cooperation in suppressing the actions of the refugee Kurds, whom he considers terrorists, gives Erdoğan important points on the domestic political scene ahead of the crucial elections.

"There will be no serious discussions on the F-16s or NATO membership or much else until after the [Turkish] elections," assesses Asli Aydintasbas, visiting fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

The US cannot soften Turkey

Turkey's request to buy 40 F-16s from the US has been unofficially linked to Ankara's concessions to Sweden and Finland, although Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that "the two issues are separate and are running their own course".

This is an attempt by the US to soften Ankara's attitude towards the Scandinavians, as the administration of President Joe Biden advocates the sale of aircrafts to Turkey.

The opposition comes from the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Robert Menendez, who conditions his support on the improvement of the human rights situation in Turkey.

The stalemate in Sweden's admission to NATO, with the prospect of a breakthrough in the second half of the year, weakens the Alliance's position in its priority engagement, which is to support Ukrainian defence against Russian aggression.

Vladimir Putin is the only winner in this contest. However much his politics, and particularly his propaganda, was shaken by the decision of Sweden and Finland to join NATO, the delay in their admission is good news for Moscow.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a patron of Putin's success, which adds another important fact to the pro-Russian side of his ambivalent position within NATO.

After acquiring Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft system and refusing to impose sanctions on Moscow, Ankara has cast yet another major doubt on its commitment to NATO membership by blocking Sweden's admission.

If Erdoğan's political calculation is such that he will give in after the May elections and the victory he expects, that will mean at least six more difficult months for the Ukrainian resistance. In that critical period, NATO support will show internal disunity and have reduced efficiency, to the delight of the Russian aggressor.