

## **Turkey and the EU: A play in search of a script**

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**O**nce a strong supporter of Turkey's membership of the EU, I have come to the conclusion that the project is doomed. When we offered membership to the Turks some fifty years ago, the world was totally different. During the cold war, Turkey, a loyal member of NATO although a rather imperfect democracy, was strategically crucial for the west. Furthermore, in view of their troubled relationship, it would have been unthinkable to make the offer to Greece and not to Turkey. Twenty years after the end after the fall of the Soviet Union, the situation has changed dramatically. Not in the sense that Turkey is now less important: quite the contrary. It borders a part of the world that is even more explosive than it was fifty years ago. It has a buoyant economy largely integrated with that of the EU. Its democracy has considerably strengthened and the prospect of periodic military *coups d'état* has receded; indeed it is the only working democracy in a Muslim country. If that is so, what justifies my pessimism? If our relationship with Turkey was a play, its title could well be "The comedy of errors".

Europe made the promise of membership and then, absorbed as it was by other more pressing tasks, forgot about it. Turkey, although it knew that the process would be long and that its fate was linked to that of Greece, took it very seriously. The then ruling secular, westernised elite looked at Europe in strategic terms: membership of the European club was, along with the support of the military, the best guarantee for the preservation of their central role in Turkish society. They kept knocking at the door, becoming more insistent after the accession of Greece. The Cyprus mess made things more difficult, but they never gave up. Europe responded confirming the promise and making economic association deeper and deeper. This produced enormous economic advantages for both sides and it is without any doubt an asset that should be preserved at all costs. As far as full membership was concerned, Europe continued to dodge the issue often hiding behind the Greeks. Then came the massive eastward enlargement (that unwisely included Cyprus as well). Not to start formal negotiations would have amounted to a public declaration that the promise was void. Under the pressure of the United States and a number of member states, the EU thought that it had no option other than to go ahead. However a number of governments were deeply sceptical, if not opposed. They counted on the length of the process, believing that nothing is irreversible and hoped that they could postpone the day of reckoning

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indefinitely. The tactic backfired. The mounting populist movement within Europe exploited the ‘Turkish question’, using the demagogic but simple argument of a possible ‘Muslim invasion’. The argument had a certain impact on the French referendum on the constitution. An issue that governments had hoped could be postponed to a distant future had become an immediate problem. It is today an absolute certainty that the accession of Turkey would be rejected by a popular vote in a significant number of countries (the French are already committed to a referendum). The scenario that has been unfolding has sent the worst possible message to the Turks: they are rejected because they are Muslim.

The whole debate was – and still is – complicated by the fact that everyone seemed to accept the basic assumption that the prospect of membership was a key instrument to ‘keep Turkey western’: a predilection that could not be taken for granted after the end of the cold war. It is this very assumption that I believe should be challenged, at least in its more simplistic formulation. Many years ago a friend of mine, a totally westernised Turkish banker, told me: “We, the secular elite, know that to use the military as an insurance policy is becoming increasingly difficult. We also seem to believe that by joining Europe we can make every single Turk like a citizen, if not of Paris and London, at least of Rome and Madrid. That is an illusion. Turkey has two souls: one secular and European, the other Asian and Muslim. To accept this ambiguity is our main challenge. If we fail, the country is doomed, irrespective of whether or not it is a member of the EU.” And he added: “I believe that if and when we manage to unify the country, we shall ourselves discover that we want to be close to Europe but not part of it.” At the time I didn’t take his words very seriously, attributing them to the gloom behind the persistent rumours of yet another military *coup*. In hindsight, I think they were wise. The problem is that Turkish democracy, as inherited from Atatürk, had some fatal flaws. It was meant to be secular and European, but it relied on the military. It wanted to join Europe, but nurtured nationalistic feelings, not only against the Greeks but also against all sorts of internal religious and ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds. In addition, it was largely corrupt and inefficient. The secular political *elite* may have had a chance to make the country ‘European’, but missed it.

In 2002 the moderate Islamic party AKP won the elections, has ruled the country ever since and is unlikely to lose power any time soon. In the meantime Turkey has changed beyond recognition. The modernisation of the economy has continued and a new class of Anatolian entrepreneurs has emerged, culturally different from the traditional Istanbul-based elite. The country is now fully engaged to draw all the potential benefits from its position as an indispensable crossroad for the transit of gas from the Caucasus and the Caspian region to Europe. Civil liberties have made some modest gains, including small steps in the direction of political freedom for ethnic and religious minorities. Some of the tenets of the secular tradition, such as the prohibition of the Islamic scarf, are being gradually challenged and eroded. The constitutional reform, recently adopted by a large majority in a referendum, will limit the power of the military. The changes are most visible in foreign policy. While maintaining its membership of NATO and pursuing the goal of EU membership, Turkey has also turned east and south, developing ties with Arab countries, Iran and Central Asia. The traditional alliance with Israel, although not formally renounced, is called into question. There are two interpretations of these developments. According to some – in Turkey as well as in the west – the AKP can be seen as the Islamic version of the Christian Democrats that have succeeded in reconciling democracy and religion in some European countries after the bitter confrontations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I haven’t heard from my banker friend recently, but it sounds like his dream is coming true. For others – mainly within the secularists in Turkey and many in the west – the purpose of the show of moderation by the AKP is only a gimmick to mask a process of deliberate Islamisation of Turkey’s society and a shift towards a foreign policy fully independent from, if not hostile to, the west. Relations with Iran are a particular cause for concern.

Powerful forces are at play within the country, the outcome is far from clear and the fears should not be dismissed too lightly. Some, particularly in the US have started a debate that could be labelled

“Who lost Turkey?”, the blame being laid squarely on the doorsteps of the EU. It is an absurd, divisive and counterproductive argument. In the first place, the drift in Turkey’s foreign policy started well before clear opposition to membership emerged within Europe. The main turning point was the invasion of Iraq, when the US grossly underestimated its impact on Turkey’s strategic interests. Nor can Europe be blamed for the emergence of anti-Israeli feelings that are (at least for the moment) much more moderate than in any other Muslim country. In fact, what do we mean by *not losing Turkey*? If the answer is that we want to go back to the cold war status quo, with a country 150% aligned with the west and a secular ruling class firmly in control, we had better give up. That Turkey has ceased to exist and will not come back. Its posture should instead be assessed as that of another important emerging country that is struggling to find its place in a multi-polar world, sees itself as a regional leader, is tempted to set overambitious goals, learns by doing and in the process makes mistakes. The disaffection of Turkish public opinion towards Europe and, even more so, towards the US is real. However, both the concept of a drift towards the Islamic world and that of a ‘neo-ottoman’ strategy should be put in perspective. The Turks are too wise to fully believe their own rhetoric. More than any other emerging country, Turkey’s national interest requires a strong link with Europe. Its economy is largely integrated with ours. Furthermore, despite emotional feelings, history separates Turkey from the Arab world at least as much as it does from Europe. As for other aspects of the ‘Ottoman dream’, links with the Turkish-speaking countries of Central Asia can be a useful bridge, but they are too loose and remote to provide for a strategic partnership. Turkey’s foreign policy will by necessity be a balanced one. Of course, either side could make mistakes that would transform the disaffection into hostility. The question is which policy is best suited to avoid this from happening and instead, to consolidate the relationship.

The best argument in favour of full membership is the same that was used to support the start of the negotiations: it gives us more tools to influence the country’s domestic and foreign policy. It should not be dismissed too easily. It is the very *raison d’être* of the EU and has produced results in many cases. However, the process has its limits and there are doubts that it would work effectively in the case of Turkey. The present EU and its institutions are adequate to enforce European law and influence a member’s behaviour if the gap with the European mainstream is not too large. They are too weak to exert effective influence when the divergence stems from factors deeply entrenched in the country’s economic, social and cultural structures, or its history. The combination of enforcement and ‘peer pressure’ has been (so far) moderately successful with Italy, Spain, Portugal and most new Eastern European members. It has been disappointing in the case of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria, and a failure in the case of Cyprus. The problem is compounded by the very nature of the enlargement process. The established doctrine is that candidates are required to accept and adapt to existing law and policies (the *acquis*). It says nothing about the future; once a member, every country has equal rights and obligations. Experience tells us that the negotiating process has its own dynamic. Beyond a certain stage, there is an almost irresistible rush to success. Candidates are in a hurry to conclude and tend to accept any request, planning to *renegotiate* once they are in; it has happened on more than one occasion. There is a moment when failure to conclude, or worsen to ratify, becomes a catastrophe to be avoided at all costs. The result is a painful process of adaptation from within that can in some cases paralyse the Union for some time. The obsession of the Brussels bureaucracy for legal precedents is such that they seem compelled to repeat past mistakes simply “because we have done the same thing before”. In the case of Turkey, its sheer size would make the problem much bigger and possibly intractable. What if the EU could, before enlargement, make a quantum jump towards more centralised political institutions? I fear that, even if the EU was willing to move in that direction, the paradoxical implication would be that the very reforms that could make Europe capable of integrating Turkey would lead the Turks to decide that they don’t want to join after all.

The best term to describe the present policy of the EU is *as if*: things go on *as if* membership was still a credible prospect. Admittedly, it has its merits. It allows both sides to buy time. It avoids an open

confrontation within the EU. It preserves whatever leverage Europe has on the country's domestic developments. The Turkish government also seems willing to sing to the same tune. Membership negotiations are a good argument to force reforms both on the opposition and on its own radical wing. It reassures the financial markets, Europe and the secularists that Islamism will not go too far. It is a policy of 'national unity'. The fact is, however, that the AKP government is happy to justify reforms on 'European' grounds, but selects them according to its own national agenda. So far so good, but the approach has also serious shortcomings. It plays into the hands of the populist euro-sceptics in Europe. It feeds the disaffection towards Europe of Turkey's public opinion that is not deceived about our real intentions. The two sides interpret in opposite ways the fact that negotiations are, if anything, stalled. In Europe most people are convinced that accession will happen, even if they don't like it. In Turkey the message is one of rejection, masked by hypocrisy. By continuing to act *as if*, we dodge the critical issue: how to establish friendly and constructive relations with an independent, self-confident Turkey. Most importantly, this approach prevents the EU from at last accepting that enlargement is not the only – nor necessarily the best – policy option that is available to deal effectively with a strategically important country on its borders.

Is there an alternative way? I believe that there is; it is difficult, but preferable to the present approach. The first step should be to declare the emperor naked and acknowledge that enlargement is no longer on the table. It is unlikely that the Turks would be the first to move; it is for the EU to take the lead in an 'operation transparency'. The political implications would have to be managed with great care. In the first place, the EU should not drop the Cyprus problem, however intractable, and make a serious and determined commitment to find a solution acceptable for the Turkish minority. Equally, members of the EU should reassure Turkey that Greece would not be allowed to exploit its privileged position as a member of the club in possible future bilateral confrontations; and Greece should be left in no doubt about it. Common economic projects, particularly in energy, should be accelerated. Finally, and most importantly, the EU should engage alongside the US, in a serious dialogue with Turkey in order to reconcile the country's perceived national interests with those of the west. It would probably be unnecessary, and possibly counterproductive, to invent institutional structures and grand names to define the new relationship; these may come later, when there is enough substance to justify them. What would be required is above all a serious, prolonged and sincere commitment, based on the recognition that Turkey is one of the main foreign policy priorities of the EU.

It could be argued that there is another possible scenario, fully compatible with the *as if* approach. In the next decade the EU, despite the rhetoric of the Lisbon Treaty, may well continue to slip into a loose intergovernmental organisation, with few binding rules and weak central institutions, while a group of core countries may (or may not) push for deeper political integration. Turkey may well find a place in such an organisation, provided suitable arrangements could be found for problems like the free circulation of labour. In this case, the appropriate title for the play would be "Much ado about nothing". As it happens, both of Shakespeare's plays end well. However, it will take time for the EU to clarify the nature of its project. The time to bite Turkey's bullet is now. If we fail to do so, the play's script could change into that of "The War of the Roses": a story of a divorce that grows increasingly bitter, in a way that neither side intended in the first place.