

Hakan Altınay

Moving parts

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It's been a good decade for Turkey. The Turkish economy grew from \$200 billion in 2001 to \$800 billion in 2011 and, according to forecasts by the *Economist*, is set to grow faster than the eurozone, the UK and the US in 2011 and 2012. Public debt has shrunk from 75 percent of GDP to 40 percent. Real interest rates have dropped from a whopping 35 percent to 2 percent, and Turkey's risk premium is now lower than that of all her southern European neighbours. Once a source of national anxiety and a playground for mafioso practices, the modern Turkish banking system is now first rate, and weathered the 2008 crisis with no casualties and handsome profits.

No longer required to roll over large public debt and with high real interest rates, Turkey had the funds to adopt universal health care and impressive social policies, and along the way witnessed a significant drop in its Gini inequality index. Moreover, in the last 10 years, Turkey has removed the death penalty from its books; ended a state of emergency that had been in place for 25 years; ended restrictions on broadcasting in the Kurdish language; recognised the European Court of Human Rights' decisions as the basis for retrials in Turkey; abolished incommunicado detentions and the effective impunity of torturers; eliminated reduced sentences for honour crimes; and ended the extraordinary privileges of the military.

Turkey's troubled relations with many of her neighbours have also improved. A visa-free travel agreement now exists between Turkey and Georgia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Russia and Syria; Ukraine may be next. Turkey has enhanced its soft power vis-à-vis her neighbours.² The basic school curriculum was overhauled to move away from rote learning and towards a modicum of critical thinking, and

² For a discussion of Turkey's soft power, see Hakan Altınay, "Turkey's Soft Power: An Unpolished Gem or an Elusive Mirage?", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April-June, 2008.

early childhood education was dramatically expanded. Compared to 2001, the Turkey of 2011 is a wealthier, more open, freer, more democratic, fairer and more peaceful country.

Whither the EU?

The EU has played a key role in this leap forward. FDI in Turkey increased fourfold immediately after the 2004 decision to start membership negotiations. The prospect of EU accession provided much-needed credibility and served to anchor Turkey's economic future. The Copenhagen criteria, in turn, provided the parallel roadmap for Turkey's political transformation. Between 2002 and 2004, political parties with diverse ideologies and priorities agreed to support several waves of EU political reforms.

Recently, the EU's vital role in Turkey's advancement has become more difficult to remember because just as this relationship was producing results, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president of France. Unlike other sceptical leaders in Europe, not only did Sarkozy question the desirability of Turkish accession, but he went as far as to reject Turkey's eligibility for membership. The fact that Turkey's eligibility for membership had been confirmed unanimously in 1989, 1999, 2002 and 2005 did not trouble President Sarkozy, and his capricious obstructionism has not, to date, received the reprimand it deserves from his European peers.³

To be sure, Turkey has not done nearly enough to engage the European public or to explain how the nation will contribute to the EU project. Turks frequently argue that they will correct the European demographic predicament and contribute to its energy security, but both of these arguments have a dubious empirical basis. Turkey does have a younger population and is at a different state of demographic transition, but new university graduates in Turkey have one of the highest unemployment rates in the OECD. Turkey is not adequately preparing its youth for the domestic labour market, let alone the European labour market. Turkey also is more reliant on Russian hydrocarbons than many countries in Western Europe, so it is not a foregone conclusion that Turkey can necessarily boost European energy security. The real prize that Turkey brings to the table is enhancing Europe's soft power in the region, but realising that potential requires a radical rethink on both

³ For a reprimand from civil society, see Altınay, Bayart, Bobinski, Hughes, Kral, Tocci and Torreblanca, "Sarkozy's blithe inconsistency over Turkey puts EU credibility at risk", letter to the *Financial Times*, 6 September 2007. Since then, we have witnessed bizarre moves such as altering the map of Europe engraved on euro coins so that Cyprus can be included without any sign of Turkey – a comical legerdemain.

sides. Currently, EU-Turkey relations call to mind the old Soviet joke of workers pretending to work and bosses pretending to pay them: the European Commission pretends that accession is possible, and Turkey plays along with this pretence.

A normative case for Turkish accession

To some, the EU is the visionary project of an ever-expanding realm of peace, prosperity and liberty. To others, it is simply a way of advancing petty national interests under the guise of higher and more enlightened goals. The advocates of the first view take pleasure and comfort in quoting Jean Monnet. Those who take the latter view point out that in the EU everyone wants to share what they do not have: for the UK, a continental market; for France, a monetary policy; for Germany, a foreign policy; and for everyone else, global relevance. Both of these narratives are partially true: integration could not have been achieved if it did not advance member states' core interests; at the same time, however, this novel and bold project could not have progressed without dramatically transforming member states' understanding of their national interest through a normative horizon.

Although the debate about Turkish accession has been going on for more than 10 years, there is not yet a normative case for Turkish accession. All previous accessions have had a more visible normative backdrop: the accession of southern Europe was not unrelated to the imperative of solidarity with new democracies; and eastern enlargement was perceived as a way of reaching out to estranged, and sometimes abused, neighbours. But no one has made a similar case for Turkish accession.

Given that the European project is first and foremost aimed at promoting peace, this could be the basis for a normative argument. Over the past century, Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, deployed troops within the current territories of two member states, Bulgaria and Greece. Turkey continues to have troops in Cyprus which are not welcomed by Greek Cypriots. Conversely, five current member states of the EU – Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom – have at some point over the past century deployed troops in what is today's Turkey. Instead of initiating a process of self-reflection, none of these nations has admitted these deployments were wrong, although in some cases the capital city at the time was occupied for several years.

The history of European attitudes and prejudices towards “the East” are due for a re-examination. Martin Luther described the Turks as the anti-Christ and the

agents of the devil. Voltaire and Lord Byron argued passionately in favour of chasing Turkish barbarians out of Europe. In a rather telling and illustrative narrative, the nineteenth-century British prime minister William Gladstone concluded that the Turks were “upon on the whole, from the black day when they first entered Europe, the one great anti-human specimen of humanity”. Unsurprisingly, in view of this thesis, Gladstone demanded that Europe should be thoroughly cleansed of the Turks.⁴ Here lies another normative imperative: The gatekeepers of the European normative agenda must now explicitly confront Europe’s orientalism. In order to repudiate its previous misdeeds, Europe must treat Turkey as an equal and welcome partner.

At the same time, Turkey has to show to friend and foe alike that it has the wherewithal to be a part of the European normative space. In recent years, Turkish society has started to debate difficult chapters of its history: the fate of the Ottoman Armenians; the 1955 pogroms against the Greeks of Istanbul; and the horror of Diyarbakır Prison throughout the 1980s. Some have also taken the bold step of assuming responsibility. This is indeed very encouraging, but still does not go far enough. Turkey says it wants to join the EU and also be an actor on the world stage through membership of the UN Security Council and the G-20, but its education system reinforces existing xenophobia and inculcates a very cynical, might-is-right view of the world. The meta-narrative in textbooks is Hobbesian and, as a result, comparative surveys have shown that Turks display relatively high levels of scepticism towards other nations.⁵

Making a normative case for Turkish accession will not be an easy task and requires both sides to act decisively. Perhaps because they had a longer list of pending issues, Turkish progressives seem to be a step ahead. The key question now is whether intellectual and progressive figures in Europe will reciprocate. If they do, each side could derive courage from the convictions of the other, forming a virtuous circle. If this happens, it could be the century’s greatest Nobel Peace Prize. If not, Turkey will continue to muddle along; the EU will not be nearly as relevant to Turkey’s evolution as it once was.⁶

4 The only thing more disturbing than reading this 1876 manuscript in 2011 is the fact that no critique of it and its underlying mentality, along the lines of Edward Said’s forceful critique of “orientalism”, has yet emerged from Europe. Instead of a critique of Gladstone’s discourse, we instead have former British Prime Minister Tony Blair declaring Gladstone to be one of his political heroes.

5 Turkey is not a party to the statute of the International Criminal Court and is one of the few countries that has still not associated itself with the Copenhagen Climate Accords.

6 Erdoğan’s April 2011 address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe provided a foretaste of what that future may look like. Erdoğan expressed in less than cordial terms that he had no intention of seeking European views and guidance on whether the 10 percent threshold for parliamentary representation was acceptable. In an eerie replay of *L’état, c’est moi*, Erdoğan also noted that he was the personal guarantor of minority rights in Turkey.

The puzzle that is the future

Having presided over Turkey's impressive leap forward, Prime Minister Erdoğan is supremely confident. To be sure, his temperament was never one of an unabated democrat; he was always more of a reluctant democrat. But he has become increasingly authoritarian over the last three years. He repeatedly tells people how many children to have, which newspapers to read, and to consume grapes rather than wine. He threatens to ban NGOs that he does not like. He explicitly holds media owners responsible for their editorial practices and columnists' views, and expects them to fire anyone whose views they do not share. Doğan Group, the largest and most pluralist media group, has attracted his sustained wrath and was fined several times their market capitalisation for back taxes. All other media owners drew their own lessons from the Doğan affair and a troubling practice of self-censorship has since prevailed.

In a sense, the Turkish predicament is not that unique. Many successful leaders have succumbed to hubris and become intoxicated with power and increasingly intolerant of dissent. What makes the current state of Turkish affairs bizarre is the general acquiescence among Turkish liberals in the face of this type of authoritarianism. Turkish liberals have decided that the armed forces are the main – and, for some, the only – impediment to a liberal democracy in Turkey. To be sure, the Turkish armed forces have a worse than chequered history, and have threatened their government with a coup as recently as 2007. Liberals, in turn, have made easy alliances with all kinds of actors intent on pushing the armed forces back, and frequently play down or ignore the illiberal tactics of their allies. The result has been a peculiar constellation in which many liberals ignore bona fide and persistent evidence of the ostracism of non-pious people in the Turkish heartland; cases of manufactured evidence in key political trials; and character assassinations and intimidation of undesirable dissidents. If Turkey is to continue its evolution towards a vibrant open society, Turkish liberals will need to stop trading cardinal maxims of the liberal canon for short-term expediency.

While Erdoğan is becoming increasingly authoritarian and losing interest in the EU, the opposition in Turkey is finally finding its European bearings. Turkey had been suffering from the absence of a capable opposition for several years. The former CHP was xenophobic and reactionary.⁷ The new CHP under Kemal

⁷ For a relatively unsuccessful attempt at demonstrating how the EU serves sceptical secularists, see Hakan Altınay and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "Why the European Union strengthens Turkish secularism", *OpenDemocracy*, 3 September 2008, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-european-union-and-turkey-strengthening-secularism>.

Kılıçdaroğlu is reengaging with the EU, producing creative social policy options, and most importantly shedding the loathsome practice of whitewashing the military's illegitimate interventions. It is unclear whether the CHP will persevere and prosper in its new vocation. If it does, it will improve the health of Turkish democracy, and will even help Erdoğan as a constructive corrective.

In the unlikely event of finding its own purpose and bearings, the EU can provide an effective and constructive reference point for all political camps in Turkey. The prospect of EU accession could provide the same kind of soothing backdrop as it did for Spain as it faced its demons.⁸ The work of the Independent Commission on Turkey deserves full acclaim in this regard.⁹ With its 2004 and 2009 reports, the Independent Commission has been a beacon of thorough analysis and principled positions. Europe and Turkey have much to gain from this kind of engagement, and need more of the same.

⁸ For a discussion on Spain and Turkey, see William Chislett, *Spanish Trajectory: A Source of Inspiration for Turkey?*, Open Society Institute, Turkey, 2008.

⁹ On the Independent Commission, see <http://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/>.