

## **Would Turkey be in the ‘winners’ club’ or ‘losers’ pit’ by 2023? A “Devil’s Advocate” perspective<sup>1</sup>**

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If I could look into my crystal ball to predict who the winners and losers of the global system would be by 2023 (the centenary year marking the founding of the Turkish Republic), do not expect me to give a rosy picture of the future for today’s 27-state European Union (EU). The current recession will no doubt ease by the end of this year, though the deep-seated systemic problems will remain, and companies will begin taking on workers again, signalling the end of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

This setback may herald a new era in the global system fundamentally altering the political and economic balance of power. The post-crisis era also looks certain to shake the established institutions, rules and players redefining a gradually emerging ‘new world order’ that is likely to reduce the influence and power of super-majors such as the US, Japan and the EU to the benefit of BRIC (Brazil, India and China) nations..

### **Will tomorrow’s EU turn into ‘Euro-Disneyland’?**

To maintain its current position let alone compete with others, the EU needs to reconnect its priorities and interests with the current and anticipated challenges faced by its people; demonstrate visibly the 21st century relevance of the concept of Europe to prevent a descent into a ‘Euro-Disneyland’ and give the policy answers to these challenges first and then let institutional change help deliver them, rather than the other way round.

This is to say that, unless Europe takes surgical action soon its further economic and political decline is almost inevitable. Without comprehensive reform Continental Europe’s overprotected, overregulated economies will continue to slow down and deteriorate. This does not mean that Italy, Germany, France, the UK, and other now-prosperous countries will become poor; on the contrary, their standard of living will remain comfortable. It is the division between “old and new Europe” which will deepen. Europe’s political and economic clout could become less relevant on the world scene.

The prospects could be even worse if internal and external pressures on the EU continue, such as; the strain on the public health and social security system from an ageing population, the ongoing erosion of its international competitiveness in relation to China and India (and other emerging “tigers”), the potential stasis of trans-Atlantic dialogue with the United States, the threat of Russia and Ukraine not

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being properly accommodated within the EU, and if the EU cannot pull its various acts together to become a single voice on foreign, security and energy policies.

### **Why did I become a Euro-sceptic?**

I do not want to sound like a doomsday alarmist because there are also positive developments to inspire optimism and the future can of course take a better course if the right actions and approach are taken in a timely manner. However, against the background highlighted above and because of the poor treatment of Turkey by the EU over the past half a century, I cannot help but be more euro-sceptic than euro-phile.

The longer one lives on this island, less than an hour's ferry ride from Calais to Dover the closer one veers to the viewpoint of the 'euro-sceptics club' We know that the British have never been terribly willing members of the EU from the outset. There are no surprises why British membership of the EU was vetoed several times during the tenure of France's President Charles de Gaulle. Long before the British joined many Continental Europeans thought they were too different to be constructive members of what was then the European Economic Community. London has always preferred its American cousins across the Atlantic and valued Commonwealth relations.

However, the Brits are honest. They do not hide their dislike of the Continental Europeans' approach to economy and life and generally despise the federalist vision of Europe. But when it comes to implementing the *acquis communautaire*, they are more effective than the most fervent advocates of the 'federal Europe' dream. There is of course no unanimity of opinion on Europe and New Labour, the Tories and Liberal Democrats often take divergent paths. Yet, a doubting stance lingers on and I have happily acquired this virus from my British friends and colleagues.

Over the years I have come to empathise with the euro-sceptical approach, particularly whilst working professionally as a Turkish diplomat, OECD staffer and now multinational corporate executive with EU institutions and politicians. My views have become stronger after having closely observed the bureaucracy and inefficacy of the European Commission squandering its annual €133 billion budget, whilst the European Parliament makes unfocused and inconsistent decisions backed by uncapped salaries and fringe benefits. Good long-term strategic decisions are rarely made and low performance levels plague many policy initiatives. There is a general insensitivity and arrogance towards other cultures and interests.

### **Playing Devil's Advocate**

My discussion with those opposed to Turkey' accession to the EU on whatever grounds, be it economic, religious, cultural, geographic or political, usually begins with the statement that "actually, like you we also do not look warmly on accession prospects, but for different reasons". This serves as a cold shower and strong reminder that Turks should not be taken for granted and are not clinging to the coat tails of Europe. Then, I list the good reasons, without empty rhetoric, why Turkey should not be interested in membership, so long as the Turkish accession dossier is handled in the way it is currently is.

What has often been forgotten in Europe is that the level of support as indicated by opinion polls and re-wording of the political party manifestos regarding the EU is declining in Turkey. There is a large and growing opposition inside Turkey to entry

into the EU emanating not only from ultra-nationalists, religious fanatics or hard-line soldiers keen on sovereignty and suspicious of the 'real' intentions of the EU. The unfairness and hypocrisy displayed on the Cyprus settlement issue has further fuelled anti-accession sentiment in the country.

At any rate, the feeling is that we do not have to prove that Turkey is an essential part of this historical-geographical territory called Europe. We have been living in this space for much longer than most new EU members. We are proud to be Europeans, but at the same time Caucasian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and Balkan, none of other Europeans have such a rich diversity and wide outreach.

There is no question that the EU is suffering from enlargement fatigue. There is widespread concern, rightly or wrongly, that Romania and Bulgaria may have been admitted prematurely. Even before the current crisis commentators in Brussels were betting on Croatian accession in 2011 (although that is looking increasingly problematic), with accession for Turkey and the Western Balkans effectively kicked into the long grass behind a fig-leaf of extended membership talks with no momentum.

The EU has regrettably lost much of its reputational capital in the eyes of most Turks on the street. To my great surprise, Turkish youth, both well educated and self-confident, as well as strong nationalists are more sceptical of the EU than the 'old guard'. Sarkozy and Merkel have not helped much by insisting on the so-called 'privileged partnership' at the expense of undermining the basic tenets of the "*pacta sunt servanda*" (Latin for "agreements must be kept"). This is not to say that Turks have done their bit of homework and met their obligations, and that all the blame should be laid at the EU's door.

EU's pre-accession strategy has somewhat eroded motivations for membership and triggered nationalistic reactions in Turkey. The widening gap between unfulfilled expectations and the EU's functioning feeds public euro-scepticism. The EU's unceasing demands for reform and the evident reluctance to Turkish accession have further fuelled mistrust, focusing the 'EU debate' on the cost of accession without much in the way of economic benefits, whilst putting a 'strait jacket' on many areas of vital importance – a perfect example of asymmetrical relationship.

### **Communicating on the same wavelength**

Frankly speaking, I take particular pleasure at airing contrarian views on this issue and being part of the debate as to why Turkey might be better off without full membership.

The real cost to the EU of Turkey's non-accession needs to be visibly highlighted. After all, there are already more than enough unconditional pro-EU supporters in Turkey. Hence, what we need are people who can act as qualified 'Devil's Advocate' and show those 'Turkey-bashing' souls that there is the other side to the coin and Turkey cannot be pushed around at their pleasure.

Our objective in doing so of course is not to disparage the EU to the point of leading people to think that there is "no real future for Turkey in the EU; we should turn our face towards the east or the north", as some of my compatriots propose. Instead, our aim is to inject a healthy dose of realism and scepticism into the generally rosy vistas presented to us, as well as to encourage the development of a balanced and acceptable 'give and take' approach for the accession process.

As Turkey's opponents argue, it is true that the eventual accession will considerably change the future outlook of both Turkey and the EU. Surely, the EU with Turkey as a member will look quite different from anything its founding fathers ever envisaged. The Union will face the challenge of fundamentally re-defining itself, progressively changing from an entity largely concerned with economic and social redistribution via its agricultural, cohesion and structural funds into a global actor that invests more on competitiveness, infrastructure, research and development, poverty reduction, military capability, and border protection. Admittedly, this process will not be easy politically since there will be strong opposition from domestic sectors, adversely affected, in nearly every country including in Turkey.

Hence, whether Turkish accession will be for better or worse in the final analysis depends very much on how both sides will agree to interact from the outset towards a commonly perceived vision.

### **Let's not devalue the EU's achievements**

To be fair, we should be thankful for the idealism and faith shown by the European Union's founders. No doubt, the EU is the biggest political union and largest economic market in the world, whose citizens live in democracy, peace, freedom and prosperity. The EU has achieved many stunning successes in its history.

It has engineered the Single Market and moved the Lisbon 2010 competitiveness agenda forward a little. The Schengen agreement is working, and Brussels is currently leading the way with the global climate change agenda. The EU of course is committed to creating a single area of freedom, justice, and security. It is also trying to achieve energy supply security, though at a snail's pace, without antagonising Russia.

Yet, today these are not enough to justify the existence of the EU to a different generation living in different times. The track record leaves us with mixed feelings.

Germany and France are no longer the powerful locomotives of the EU. They are also disillusioned with the Eurozone, the weakness of the EU institutions, the referendum failures of both the European constitution and the Lisbon treaty. They tend to become more nationalist and selfish than European after realising that the EU flying on autopilot, run by its bureaucrats and inefficient processes has become less relevant to their goals and people.

The fact is there are serious blockages in the EU system right now and if these are not cleared and, if radical new structures are not put in place instead of the current cosmetic changes, then it is inevitable that inner EU bickering will only become more aggravated and ultimately irreparable. If this happens then no one would expect the EU to have any real impact anymore on the global system. It will be relegated to a regional bloc status.

### **What is in it for us?**

Over the past few years the EU entrance aspiration has lost ground and speed in Turkey. This cannot be explained away by simply saying that Brussels has not satisfied the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s expectations causing Ankara to draw back. In my opinion, it is not that simple. We have a better understanding now of the strengths, weaknesses and hypocrisies of the EU, which has had the positive effect of ending our once frantic obsession for EU accession

and adopt more of a foot-down approach, based around 'what is in it for us?' The public opinion polls also point to such a cooling of emotions vis-à-vis the EU.

Under the current conditions, even if the Cyprus problem were to be solved... the European Commission's annual reports were to present evidence of a perfectly clean record on Turkey's progress... all 35 of the accession chapters were to open at the same time and achieve endorsement...furthermore, even if the Armenian 'genocide' allegations were adopted in the way Brussels has pushed for...we should not mislead ourselves into believing that Turkish EU membership is anywhere on the visible horizon. The prospects could only be different if there is a dramatic change of heart and combined effort to push forward the accession under the stewardship of France, Germany and the UK.

Those who present this accession phenomenon in a starkly black-and-white fashion as "what, are you also opposed to EU accession? Isn't the EU the natural destination for our country's historical vocation? If we don't enter the EU we will become nothing but lunch for the wolves, stuck in the vicious cycle of nationalism, religious fanaticism in the Middle East!" should not be given a sympathetic ear either.

The current strategy of the EU machinery appears to be based on the no-longer-functioning and no-longer-credible 'carrot and stick' approach, trying to hold Turkey at bay and evade as long as possible a firm decision through drawn-out accession talks. This is completely in line with how the country has always been treated – this needs to fundamentally change.

If Turkey were to correctly analyze the global power shift, which is putting Asia-Pacific at the forefront of economics and geopolitics and could position itself accordingly, it would assure itself a rightful place on the 'winners' train' even before the EU could. If the EU fails to shake itself into action to play a central role on the world stage and, if it doesn't quell the flames of its own internal fires and make the long overdue political and institutional transformations for this, then whether or not Turkey becomes a full EU member won't matter in the larger unified picture.

To become a global power on a par with the US and China, the EU has to embrace Turkey. If this will does not exist there is no point in wasting our energy on EU accession games.

### **Turkey to become a precious asset and the EU a 'strait-jacket'?**

So why is it that Turkey should want to join an ageing EU, whose competitiveness and world standing are fast eroding, and which is so heavily dependent on outside energy resources and in a constant state of internal battles between the 'old' and 'new' Europe?

We need to carefully weigh what accession to the EU means for us. Will it soak up our dynamism and burden us with social security responsibilities for its ageing and less-than-entrepreneurial populations?

Will we be able to benefit from common agricultural policy subsidies as Spain, France, Ireland, Italy and Greece did for decades to reach their current level of development? How long will we wait for full participation in decision-making processes and for free movement of people?

What about its empty coffers – will there be any money left in the EU's lucrative cohesion and infrastructure funds? What are the geo-political implications - will the EU accession restrict our freedom in foreign policy and tie us down when it comes to moves towards Russia, Iran, the Caucasus, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East?

We have to seriously debate these issues and ask tough questions. Before consuming more of our national energies we need to get definite and satisfactory answers!

One overarching argument in favour of Turkey's accession is to embed Western values and standards in our lives – this is a great aspiration, but can we really say that the only worthwhile values reside in 27 countries in the world? Are our own values and institutions, which await re-discovery, and which have been developed over thousands of years of social and political experience really less valuable or less worthy of consideration?

### **How should negotiations be conducted?**

This is the first time that accession negotiations have been so controversial amongst EU member state. Negotiations regarding Turkey's accession have so many uncertainties and serious political and economic impediments, making it absolutely essential that both sides should agree on an imaginative, constructive problem-solving approach to produce a successful conclusion of this process.

The discussions in Brussels clearly indicated that accession negotiations would not be on the basis of a "business-as-usual" mandate with an emphasis on the *acquis communautaire* and Turkey's ability to effectively apply it at the moment of entry into the EU. The attainment of European standards with respect to democratization and liberalization, as well as changing not only certain practices and legislation, but also the public and official mindsets on both sides would need to be the primary goal.

It goes without saying that the process begun by Europe's leaders in Brussels will have to be completed by the politicians of the future – probably during the lifetime of at least two new governments in each country. Given the high degree of domestic controversy that the Turkish dossier causes, governments may not have any interest in keeping the Turkish accession issue visible on the public agenda until such a time that a positive public perception of Turkey is generated. Most EU leaders would prefer to put the issue on the backburner by leaving the concrete task of preparing and conducting the negotiations mainly to the European Commission.

### **Redefining the Turco-EU roadmap**

Yes, it is really time to shake ourselves. Time to identify clearly who we are and what our national interests are and to place these on the scale and re-assess their relative weights. Time has come to clarify what our relations with the EU should be from **our** viewpoint and not as dictated by Brussels.

Pay no attention to the calls for 'privileged partnership', put out there by the likes of Sarkozy and Merkel. They do not even merit a response. These are, after all, nothing but political stances, displayed by those who have perfected the art of playing to the tribunes – opinions which can go as quickly as they come.

Turkey's case for serious consideration by the EU has often rested on broader strategic and political issues, rather than civilization-based factors. The real post-

Cold War strategic significance of Turkey to Europe lies in the problems that a less stable or more activist Turkey could create. Europe requires a stable, modernizing and democratic Turkey to help keep radical Islam from Europe's borders. It needs a Turkey that is cautious in its regional policies toward the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East and, which seeks to avoid confrontation with Moscow and Tehran. The point is not so much what Turkey offers to Europe as what its 'loss to Europe' could entail. In a certain sense, what Europe needs from Turkey is that it is contained, controlled and prudent.

Well, EU states will certainly act in self-interest. There is nothing wrong with this, but the important thing is what we, Turkey, want. A nation with a 750 billion dollar economic powerbase, with one of the largest and most influential military forces in the world and a cultural hinterland which we have become more aware of in recent years, never mind its role as the crossroads of energy flows and civilisations cannot be ignored. We are unique cornerstone in our ability to synthesize the western values and Islam's traditions between the north and the south.

Perhaps it needs to be said out loud that such a nation with an imperial history cannot meekly consent to the capricious behaviour of the authorities in Brussels and in some EU capitals, nor that Turkey can be judged by the same 'take it or leave it' criteria applied to countries like Malta, South Cyprus, or Bulgaria.

Otherwise, no one can say just where this 'open-ended' process is going to drag us to and in fact this whole process will continue forever soaking up our national energy like a sponge. For now though, let us leave these accession talks to continue at technical levels. Let's embrace the same approach they are taking. Let's not destroy what we have so far achieved on this front, but let's demand to see the cards in their hand and to protect our own national interests as jealously as they guard theirs.

In the meantime, we should focus firmly on being not a 'paper tiger', but a real 'regional power' to be reckoned with economically, militarily and democratically - one which is strong and 'problem-free' in relation to its neighbours, robust against dealing with the fallout of the global depression, and a power, which can offer its neighbours and its own people prosperity, peace, and security. Do not worry – the rest will simply follow.

### **Judge Turkey for its potential and not on an historically biased or current clouded view**

More importantly, EU leaders would be better to judge Turkey on the basis of its potential economic and geostrategic importance from today to 2023 and what the future holds for Europe by then - not on the narrow and short-term interests of today or yesterday. With Turkey the EU will not only achieve an immensely richer cultural diversity, but also considerable manufacturing capacity, entrepreneurship, and better foreign/security policy outreach to the key regions of the world, i.e. Russia, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Central Asia. It is a 'take it or leave it' deal for the EU, too.

The two terms of government may suffice to fundamentally change the face (and the substance) of Turkey for the better, while the EU will also be going through changes and making difficult choices. One should recall that the founding father of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk accomplished the bulk of his revolutionary modernising vision for the country in a period of around 15 years (1923-1938), between the two destructive world wars and in a radically greater state of economic

deprivation. Consider what more can be achieved over the next two decades in the era of rapid globalisation. Then, it is not a science-fiction to predict that both Turkey and the EU will be starkly different from what they are today and it is in their hands to shape the common future starting now, rather than speculating on the fears to come.

Let's maximise the benefits of our strong association with the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia, the United States and Asia-Pacific as much as possible without being too much obsessed or blinded about belonging to one club. When we arrive at 2023, will we look back at ourselves and the EU asking "did we make the right decisions and take the right steps at the right time?"

Hopefully, the debate I am presenting can influence this direction positively from where we are now.

### **About the author**

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