

Europe's Tipping-Point, Turkey's Solution Nora Fisher Onar (2011)

The prospect of Turkish membership of the European Union looks more remote than ever. But neither Europe's infirmity nor Turkey's widening horizons need be the end of the story. A revived relationship based on mutual benefit remains possible, says Nora Fisher Onar.

The European Union had in the 1990s the best story in town. Its core idea was the notion that former adversaries could undertake a shared journey of mutual benefit and understanding in which the unique dignity of each partner was preserved and respected. It seemed to represent a creative extension of the form of transnational cooperation that Europe had **pioneered** since the 1950s, and make the continent well-placed to manage 21st-century challenges.

The "EU-ropean" story continued to resonate in the early years of the new century, in a context of increasing global interdependence and struggling American interventionism. The glow was reflected in descriptions of the union as "one of the most formidable institutional machines for managing differences peacefully ever invented", and as a "Kantian paradise" that exposed Washington's excessive reliance on "hard power". The EU's "normative power" was compelling enough for a dozen accession countries and their 100 million citizens sought - after the **major** enlargements of 2004 and 2007 - to remake themselves in Europe's image; and for regional organisations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to seek in the EU a model of best practice.

Turkey too found the European story irresistible. The union embodied what Turkish reformers had since the mid-19th century called "contemporary civilisation" - the most advanced type of political and economic governance. It was so potent that in the early 2000s, many members of Turkey's pro-secularist establishment defected to the emerging (and EU-friendly) pro-religious counter-establishment. The Islamist-rooted Justice & Development Party (**AKP**) that came to **power** in November 2002 also embraced the European idea and inaugurated legal and social transformations that had **Europe** as a constant reference-point.

The intense public debates in Turkey in this period split opinion over what Turkey could expect from Europe in several directions. Some Turks emphasised the variety of European political sentiment, welcoming social-democrat and

green overtures but fearing that the right's anti-Turkish populism would forever thwart Turkey's membership aspirations; sceptics viewed the EU as a parochial club whose inclusive rhetoric masked insuperable hostility towards Muslims; others focused on the EU process's "demand-side", arguing that the AKP's support for the European option was a tactic to secure leverage against the secularist military and judiciary.

The AKP's momentum was unstoppable during its first term in office. It calculated that by associating itself with the European alternative to Washington's aggressive post-9/11 "civilisationalism" it could reap great benefits; and that if the effort failed, Europe would carry the blame. This proved astute, for as Ankara made rapid progress towards achieving the "Copenhagen criteria" the prospect of Turkish membership became a foil in European agonising about the union's future.

The interlocking worlds

The ensuing polarisation over Turkey-in-Europe (from Giscard d'Estaing's view that it would "destroy" the European project to Slavoj Žižek that it was Europe's last chance for "effective relevance") eventually shattered the EU-ropean story of the 1990s. The zeitgeist that succeeded it is pervaded by pessimism, a mood reinforced by wider geopolitical changes that seem to herald a post-European (even post-western) era. Europe looks to many to be approaching a critical transitional moment where relative decline (*vis-à-vis* previous glory and the still formidable United States) could become absolute decline (*vis-à-vis* rising powers in an increasingly multipolar world).

It is true that Europe faces enormous structural challenges (demographics, growth, unemployment, welfare). But the shift from the jubilant soft-power narrative of the post-cold-war period may have gone too far. The EU retains great assets: it is the world's largest economy, with a large skilled labour-force concentrated in the high added-value service sector, and a system of governance that for all its unwieldiness may better suit a world of transnational threats and opportunities than any other. Above all, Europe's story of mutual recognition via mutual benefit still has life in it. Indeed, in this respect the Turkish dimension of the European debate may have come full circle, since for almost every one of Europe's problems there is a Turkish solution.

During a period of European self-doubt Turkey has acquired a new confidence. After implementing the IMF's structural reforms, Turkey has averaged 6% annual **growth** over a decade and attracted up to \$20 billion in annual investment (in the 1990s it was \$1 billion); is climbing the ranks of the G20 and aiming to have the world's tenth largest economy by 2050; seeking to become an energy hub capable of transmitting vast quantities of gas and oil from sources in Russia, the Caucasus, central Asia, and the Gulf; and radiating its cultural power (not least TV soap-operas) in all directions.

In foreign policy too, Turkey's engagement with its neighbours has led to exponential growth in its regional trade (from \$2 to \$30 billion in a decade in the middle east alone), in part via free-trade agreements with smaller countries such as Georgia. Its diplomatic relations are also blossoming, with cultural, educational, and business-oriented initiatives supplementing conventional diplomacy. Ankara's view is that this approach enables Turkey to act as a "de-securitising" actor in multiple regions, in part by opening lines of communication with pivotal players inaccessible to western mediators.

The fallout with Israel and tensions with Washington attest to the pitfalls of this path. But a more assertive Turkey need not signify a turning away from the west. For one thing Turkey's western orientation is structural, a function of geography; for another there are elements of continuity as well as rupture in a new foreign policy where multiple **trajectories** are possible.

There are, however, other warning-signs, some of which Ivan Krastev identifies in his lively **openDemocracy** essay (see "**Arab revolutions, Turkey's dilemmas: zero chance for "zero problems"**", 24 March 2011). The danger of hubris is one, revealed in a foreign-policy stance that (for example) champions the "wretched of the earth" in Palestine while cosying up to vicious dictators like **Omar al-Bashir** and Muammar Gaddafi.

The political leadership's domestic attitudes is another: its **majoritarian** populism, its inconsistency over the **rights** of "others" within Turkey's heterogeneous polity, its pre-election flirtation with a harder nationalist line. These tendencies amplify the alienation of some core AKP allies (in Turkey's liberal intelligentsia, the Kurdish population, and the business community) and may endanger the image of a vibrant democracy that Turkey seeks to **project** in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt.

Ivan Krastev pithily **observes** that Turkey's leadership is both vulnerable and unaware of its vulnerability. The way to turn back from hubris is for the AKP to recognise that its newfound influence emanates from Turkey's (incomplete) **democratisation** along European lines; and that it and Turkey's comparative advantage lies not in retreating from the EU but in making Europe's democratic peace its own and helping to diffuse across its region(s).

The revamped relationship

The task that this implies is to reframe the **tense** EU-Turkey relationship in terms of mutual benefit, in ways that allow for both recognition of commonalities and celebration of differences. This may not require accession in the conventional sense. It could be achieved by developing an approach to **enlargement** which transcends the zero-sum logic of member/non-member.

It would be politically impossible to renounce the **prospect** of full membership; but in fact, Ankara may prefer quietly to maintain its newfound freedom of manoeuvre in relation to this prospect. The Nato deal **reached** in Lisbon, which ensures Turkey's ongoing commitment to the alliance while acknowledging its differentiated interests in its own sphere of influence, is a promising precedent here.

Turkey's turnaround on the Libya **intervention** is a case in point. Ankara began by opposing foreign intervention out of **concern** for its citizens and investments in the country, and a misplaced belief that this would place it on the side of Arab opinion; then quickly recalibrated when it realised that Nicolas Sarkozy, pursuing a vision of Europe and the Mediterranean exclusive of Turkey, would spearhead the intervention. This eventual bid to be the ally capable of bridging western and local interests bore immediate fruit in the release into Turkish diplomatic custody of western journalists captured and maltreated by Gaddafi's forces.

The emphasis on mutual benefit in a revamped EU-Turkey **relationship** could entail building on a logic of "gradual" or "graduated" integration and membership, involving a negotiating-in-stages approach that combines Turkey's active participation in EU institutions and decision-making but without possessing a veto until the final stage. This would require a guarantee of eventual membership (to generate the political will necessary for reforms, bargaining, and concession-making in the interim), which if secured would buy

time for both the EU and Turkey - and their respective [publics](#) - to prepare for and adjust to the prospect of Turkish membership.

There are abundant precedents. Within the framework of integration, the logics of “variable geometry” or “multi-speed” Europe have permitted member-states to participate actively in EU [affairs](#) without compromising either national interests or the evolution of the union. At the same time, what should be discarded is the notion of “special partnership”, with its implication that Turkey serve as a permanent, second-rate buffer-state between the EU and the middle east. A rising Turkey has no incentive to play this role, and insistence on the demeaning formula only compels Turkey to envisage its relationships with Europe and the middle east in arid and disabling either/or terms.

Can EU politicians rise to the challenge? That will depend on their ability to turn [worry](#) about moving from relative to absolute decline into determination to reverse the tide. In turn that will require choosing pragmatism and soul-searching above [scapegoating](#), and refining ideas of belonging, citizenship, and democratic participation rather than disenfranchising those who are different.

The trend today, regrettably, appears to be in the opposite direction. In societies once proud of their pluralism and tolerance, the far-right is rising; and establishment figures increasingly seek to co-opt such platforms. This can only backfire in an EU where over 15 million Muslim [Europeans](#) are settled for good. Such policies as the French law which can deprive naturalised immigrants of their [citizenship](#) creates a disturbing precedent in this respect. They amount to a betrayal not only of the EU promise of the 1990s, but the humanist, enlightened tradition of the equal and inviolable rights of man and citizen given to the world by the French themselves.

The transference of insecurity to the vulnerable is a feature of all societies where the collective pie is shrinking. But it could hardly be more belittling to the European [idea](#), nor more disruptive to Europeans’ ability to project their preferences on the world. The great irony is that many within and beyond the union would like to see this projection succeed: a testimony to the power of the European story. For Europe to re-engage Turkey by reframing the enlargement/integration process through the prism of “graduated” integration may give that story a new lease on life, and mend fences with a crucial ally - before Turkey loses interest in Europe altogether, to the detriment of all.

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