

# Patronising Turkey is a dangerous game for Europe

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**Europe is doing its level best to tell Turkey it is no longer wanted as part of the European Union. It is a high-risk game with little to gain and a great deal to lose. How much longer will this secular, democratic, Muslim country look westwards to a European future, instead of turning east ?**

Take the proclamation by Jacques Chirac, president of France, on a recent visit to Armenia. Indulging his hosts and delighting the politically active Armenian diaspora in France, Mr Chirac said Turkey should recognise the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the turmoil of the first world war as "genocide". In doing so, he unilaterally created a new condition of EU membership for Turkey. This is rather like Tony Blair popping up in Madagascar or Algeria and telling France to apologise for the postwar massacres undertaken by French soldiers as they put down uprisings.

The Armenian massacres are a dreadful scar in the memory of that proud people, torn apart by the many wars and foreign interventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it was the decaying elements of the Ottoman Empire that killed the Armenians, not the modern Turkish Republic. If the EU is to demand apologies for historic misdeeds from its existing members, let alone potential members, then it may as well dissolve itself.

After Mr Chirac's statement, Olli Rehn, EU enlargement commissioner, reiterated that recognition of a genocide is not an official precondition of membership. It was a welcome correction. But how do you explain away the European Commission president, José Manuel Barroso, saying that the era of EU enlargement is over?

This problem goes beyond the bluster of bureaucrats in Brussels or an elderly French president on his way out of office. In April 2004, European foreign ministers solemnly agreed to open trade links with northern Cyprus. They have broken that promise. I took part in that negotiation, and I find it shameful that powerful European states are unable to enforce their own decisions.

Turkey wakes up almost every month to find a new hurdle on its path to Europe. The mishandling of "the Turkish question" would seem laugh-able were it not so important. The implicit repudiation of its European ambitions is already fuelling support for radical groups in Turkish domestic politics who argue that Europe is reneging on its pledge to negotiate seriously. This matters because Turkey is pivotal to Britain and other European states realising their interests overseas. Today, scores of thousands of Europe's best soldiers are fighting the anti-democratic forces of jihadist terror networks from the shores of Lebanon to the frontier mountains of Pakistan. If Europe wants to promote democracy in the region, Turkey is an indispensable ally.

Turkey, of course, does much to drive its friends in the west quite mad. The trials of writers and journalists are an insult to any notion of democracy. The occupation of northern Cyprus and refusal to normalise relations with Nicosia is intolerable - but is likely to last forever if Europe continues to patronise the Turks. However, the enormous progress in rule of law, freedom of intellectual activity and the defence of the secular state against illiberal religious fundamentalism remains an important advance

in the struggle to defend democracy.

Europe cannot rely on its loyalty because Turkey has alternatives. It can create a Black Sea alliance with Vladimir Putin's increasingly authoritarian Russia. It could even forge a coalition with a nuclear-armed Iran; the neighbours have rarely threatened each other in the past. There are energy-rich republics to Turkey's east that share its language and culture. Islamists in Turkey have long advocated a rapprochement with Pakistan to create a crescent of influence and power linking a series of Islamic states governed by strong semi-military regimes. An independent Turkey, free of ties to the EU, could also clash with European foreign policy goals by aggressively pursuing its interests in the Mediterranean or the Middle East.

Turkey's friends need to lead a diplomatic offensive to ensure the EU honours its obligations. Leaving Turkey turning on the spit of European debate - roasted by condescension, ignorance and hostility - will transform one of Europe's greatest assets into a source of conflict and tension. For good or ill Europe is now intervening in a region full of problems in Iran, Iraq and Israel-Palestine. Making an enemy of Turkey will make solving any of these problems far more difficult.

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