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Don’t give up on Turkey

The European Union's relations with Ankara go beyond those with President Erdoğan, says German MP Nils Schmid

Turkey has now been an EU candidate country for 20 years. While the first few years were characterised by far-reaching reform in Turkey and mutual convergence, today EU–Turkish relations are in deep crisis. One recent example of this is Ankara’s cynical attempt to use refugee policy to put the EU under pressure.

In the face of endless reports of arbitrary arrests, torture and corruption it is easy to forget that the prospect of EU membership gave rise to comprehensive political and economic reforms in Turkey. The death penalty was abolished and torture was banned, for example. There were some problems with implementation, but progress was considerable. Alongside that, Turkey enjoyed historically unprecedented growth and employment for 15 years.

Today, the prospects are a whole lot gloomier. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s power has waned. Unable to respond adequately to the economic crisis, and weakened domestically by the ending of the peace process with the Kurds, the opposition victory in the municipal elections and splits in his own party, Erdoğan has taken an authoritarian turn and feels himself beset by internal and external enemies. The response has been massive encroachments on the rule of law and human rights, as well as much worse relations with the West.

What would be the best way of dealing with this impasse?

First, we should avoid falling into the trap of personal confrontation with Erdoğan. He positively craves contention with supposed external enemies, whether it be the EU, the United States or George Soros, for a domestic show of strength.

Second, we should continue the process of embedding Turkey in Euro-Atlantic structures and refrain from defining relations with this

indispensable partner in terms of the person of the current president. Turkey's NATO membership remains strategically important for the protection of the Alliance's south-eastern flank. Resolving the Cypress issue and a reconciliation of interests with Greece would scarcely be served by Turkey's exit. Having said that, Turkey must be clear that alliance solidarity does not extend to foreign policy adventurism in Syria or Libya.

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The customs union opens up to the EU a potential market of 80 million people and a hub to Asia. At the same time, Turkey should not jeopardise its involvement in European supply chains and the associated growth potential through lack of transparency and corruption.

The EU accession process is not a gift to Erdoğan, but a lever with which to promote democracy, human rights and an economic and social order in Turkey based on the rule of law. Millions of people in Turkey pin their hopes on the EU. Terminating the accession negotiations 'to punish Erdoğan' would affect all those who stand for European values in difficult circumstances. In light of the sharp deterioration of the human rights situation, however, resuming the accession negotiations is conceivable only after the current or a successor government has made considerable improvements. Modernisation of the customs union would represent a beginning. The first step would be to rectify the defects afflicting implementation of the existing regulations, before extending them to, for example, services and agriculture.

Third, we must not let up in our dialogue with Turkey. This includes an honest look at the past 20 years. It was wrong of Merkel and Sarkozy de facto to bring the EU accession process to a standstill from 2007. Turkey naturally has legitimate security interests in the fight against terrorism. Furthermore, Turkey has achieved a great deal in its reception of Syrian refugees. The refugee agreement between the EU and Turkey must be preserved and Turkey must have planning certainty. The EU should make more money available to enable Syrian refugees to remain in Turkey beyond 2021. Those who reject their enforced return to Syria must also be prepared to support schools, accommodation and social infrastructure in Turkey over the long term.

Even though more and more problems have piled up over the past few years we should spare no effort in tackling at least some of them together with the Turkish government – before they stifle relations entirely.

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