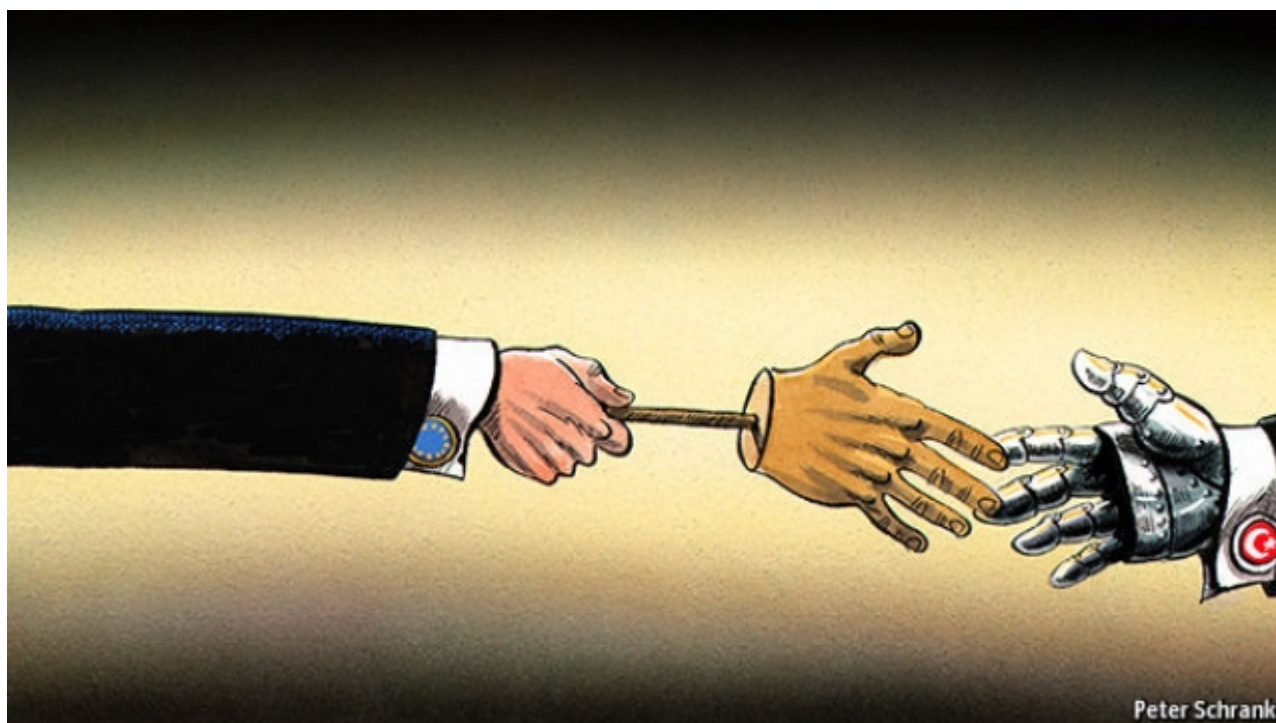


Charlemagne

Turkey's bid to join the EU is a bad joke; but don't kill it

Two cheers for hypocrisy



■ Print edition | Europe

Oct 13th 2016

THE two young women glance at each other before confiding their secret. Turkey has become such a fearful place, they say, that they have formed a pact never to have children. Amid official reprisals and purges after a failed coup in July, the lights of democracy are dimming. Each week brings a fresh wave of detentions or sackings, and no one is immune. The women have a friend who was stripped of a degree because of her university's links to Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylvania-based preacher whom the government accuses of plotting the coup. Official paranoia scales heights of absurdity: last week a textbook was banned for using the letters "f" and "g", Mr Gulen's initials, in a geometry puzzle. "Everybody's scared shitless," says one prominent academic.

Might the women turn to the European Union, which shares their concerns, for support? Hardly. Europe is hypocritical, they say; it expects solidarity after terror attacks but offered little after the coup. Their sentiments are widely shared, and not only in Fatih, a pro-government area of Istanbul roamed this week by Charlemagne. As the women divulged their laments, across town Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's hot-headed president, was slamming "countries that...are still preaching to us about human rights", in front of leaders from such beacons of democracy as Azerbaijan, Venezuela and Russia. Mr Erdogan and Vladimir Putin vowed to push on with Turkish Stream, a mooted gas pipeline. "Russia treats us better than Germany," says Nazif Özbek, a shop-owner in Fatih. "Europe always stabs us in the back."

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It is hard to remember the last time EU-Turkey relations were this sour. The Turks, with good reason, are furious with the EU's sluggish show of support after a coup attempt that left about 270 people dead, an elected president nearly toppled and parts of the parliament in Ankara bombed to dust. It took weeks for EU officials to visit. Many Turks, including those who are no fans of Mr Erdogan, suspect the Europeans

wanted the plotters to succeed.

As for the Europeans, they are struggling to maintain diplomatic decorum as Mr Erdogan tightens the screws. It was bad enough, they say, that last year's migrant crisis forced them to bribe Turkey to keep refugees away. Worse, Turkey is negotiating to join the EU. The accession process is supposed to bind candidates closer to European norms. But under its would-be sultan, Turkey is sinking into the marsh of dictatorship.

Turkey has never been close to membership. But for a time that didn't matter. Before talks began in 2005 Mr Erdogan used the popular prospect of accession to anchor domestic reforms, such as scrapping the death penalty and allowing Kurdish-language broadcasts, and to shove the meddlesome army back in the barracks. Exporters rubbed their hands at the prospect of deeper links with European firms and investors. If some Europeans were sceptical—Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, once said Turkey should settle for a "privileged partnership"

short of membership—others, cheered by the EU's expansion into the former Soviet bloc, believed in the power of enlargement to transform their giant neighbour (and NATO ally) from the inside.

No one makes that claim any more. For years Mr Erdogan's government has been locking up journalists, compromising the judiciary and allowing corruption to flourish. The accession talks have long been a polite fiction, and the post-coup reprisals have exposed the hypocrisy to a harsh glare. The Austrian government, never a fan of Turkey's membership bid, now wants to kill it. Nicolas Sarkozy, running for a second shot as France's president, says the EU should tell Turkey it belongs in Asia. Mr Erdogan, meanwhile, recently told parliament that Turkey and the EU had come to the "end of the game", days after he hinted at territorial ambitions over Greek islands. He accuses the EU (unfairly) of breaking its promise to grant visa-free access to Turks.

Each side's interests now lie elsewhere. Turkey's energies are focused on stopping Syria's Kurds from carving out a statelet along the border, and on weakening the Gulenists' extensive international ties. It is quietly drifting from the EU, quitting joint cultural and educational institutions. Europeans, for their part, fear the poisonous effects of the universal unpopularity of Turkish accession among voters. Surveying all this with a weary eye, some pro-EU Turks wonder if the relationship needs a different footing.

Don't go cold Turkey

Time, then, to pull the plug? Tempting, but no. After the coup, amid credit-rating downgrades and signs of an investment freeze, Turkey can ill afford to turn its back on its largest trading partner. For all his ranting, Mr Erdogan is unlikely to cut his links to Europe as instability roils his southern neighbourhood. The Europeans hate having to play nice to Mr Erdogan, but fear where his instincts could take him if the relationship were entirely severed. In their darker moments, sceptics should think of that far-off day when Mr Erdogan is no longer in charge. If happier times come, the comatose patient can always be awoken.

But the two sides cannot sleep through their immediate concerns. From counter-terrorism to trade to migration, the EU and Turkey urgently need fresh ways to work together. Biannual summits would be a start. The refugee agreement, which is just about holding, may provide a model for future co-operation. A deal on Cypriot reunification, which is within reach, would be another. If Turkey meets the EU's

conditions for visa liberalisation, which one Eurocrat says is “eminently” achievable, countries like France and Austria should not block it out of spite.

Accession was supposed to be a noble process that would expand European ideals of freedom and democracy to regions that had known little of either. In Turkey's case, it is a seductive narcotic that has become dangerous for the addicted patients to give up. For the foreseeable future, Turkey will remain a troublesome neighbour for the EU, irascible but utterly indispensable. Europeans will have to swallow a degree of hypocrisy.

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "Two cheers for hypocrisy"