Each under his own vine and fig tree

At a time when most of medieval Europe was burning witches at the stake, one country stood out as a haven for free thought and religious toleration. In 1492, as the mass expulsion of the Jews from Spain began, the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid II opened the gates of Turkey to the refugees fleeing the Inquisition. The same tradition moved the secular rulers of post-imperial Turkey to welcome those escaping Nazi persecution in the 1930s, including many Jewish scientists and academics who would otherwise have perished in the gas chambers. Europe's molecular biologists repaid the favour by officially admitting Turkey to our community in the 1990s, a move which has facilitated the development of science in Turkey and also brought tangible academic benefits to the rest of Europe.

On a broader political level, Turkey remains stuck at the gates of Europe, where it has stood metaphorically for centuries, even though geography places the southern gateway to Europe fully within its territory. Turkey's application for full EU membership, officially under negotiation since 2004, is proceeding at a snail's pace. The ostensible reasons are the many instances in which national laws deviate from EU norms, which will require many legal reforms before full membership can be ratified. The earliest date by which negotiations can be completed is estimated as 'around 2021'. By contrast, the Baltic states managed to negotiate and legislate their way out of the woeful legacy of Soviet rule to full EU membership in just 6 years.

The attitude of several EU governments towards Turkey's European aspirations raises suspicion that the delay is due more to deliberate political obstruction than mere legislative technicalities. Many senior politicians from within the EU27, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, have openly voiced disapproval of Turkish membership on grounds that seem to have more in common

with prejudice than with core European values. Former French President Giscard d'Estaing asserted as far back as 2002 his view that Turkish accession would be "the end of Europe", since Turkey was "not a European country" and has "a different culture, a different approach, a different way of life". Most commentators have interpreted this as a weakly coded condemnation of the fact that Turkey's inhabitants are overwhelmingly of the Muslim faith, even if the place of religion in Turkish society is no stronger than in most other European countries.

Ironically, Muslims already make up a sizeable proportion of the population of German and French cities. Presumably, failure to come to terms with this reality underlies the rejectionist stance of many politicians, including the French President, who in 2009 promulgated a constitutional amendment that would require popular approval of Turkish accession in a referendum. Perhaps those same politicians who argue against Turkish membership on geographical grounds have not noticed that part of France's own territory is also not within Europe. The inhabitants of Réunion (Indian Ocean), Guadeloupe and Martinique (Caribbean) and Guyane (South America) travel on European passports and elect members of the European Parliament. They eat croissants for breakfast, which they buy using the same Euro coins as in Paris. More EU citizens live in these places than in each of the four smallest member states. If geography is the sole criterion for EU membership then France arguably has no more rights than Turkey, and should thus be expelled if Turkey is not admitted. Iceland, another worthy candidate country, would have to suffer a catastrophic geotectonic event to get around the fact that most of its population technically lives in North America.

Perhaps Giscard was thinking of Turkey's exotic language as the defining symbol of its cultural separateness. In that case, the Finns, Estonians and Hungarians will presumably welcome their distant linguistic cousins

from Turkey in a new Uralic–Altaic Union, when they are expelled from the EU for not speaking an Indo-European dialect.

The Turkish constitution, it is true, does contain some vestiges from the period of military rule that limit human rights and freedoms. Secularism remains constitutionally entrenched to a point that some people feel limits the free exercise of religion. The Islamic headscarf, for example, is banned in Turkish schools. Only one EU member state has enacted a similar ban: France.

Another inconvenience is that Turkish troops occupy Northern Cyprus to protect the cultural autonomy of its inhabitants. However, the same is true of Britain, which occupies Northern Ireland for the same reason.

Currently, Turkey is ruled by the moderate Justice and Development Party, AKP, which is loosely inspired by the values of Islam. Some rejectionists argue that an EU member state with such a government could represent a fifth column for the spread of militant Islam in Europe. Allowing such parties to come to power represents a slippery slope towards theocracy. Yet, the largest EU member state is also ruled by a party that carries an explicit reference to religion within its own name. Does the participation of the Christian Democratic Union in the German federal government represent a fundamental threat to republican and liberal values? Should Germany now be expelled from the EU as well?

The EU exists to bind together in perpetuity the interests of the successor states of the great empires whose rivalry led to the calamities of 1914 and 1939. Turkey is one of those states. An even worse calamity might await us if Europe repudiates one of its richest civilizations, pushing it into the arms of those who would wish us harm. Europe's molecular biologists have led the way. Now it is time for the rest of society to follow.

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EMBO reports (2011) 12, 379. doi:10.1038/embor.2011.63