



A Turkish-EU Opera Buffa

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey says it wants to join the EU, but has no intention of complying with membership rules. The EU says it wants Turkey to join, but is fully aware that it does not qualify. Turkey pushes forward in the hope that the EU might someday change its rules; the EU pushes forward in the hope that Turkey might someday qualify. Neither will happen.

When Turkey officially applied to become a full member of the European Union (EU), cell phones looked like bricks, Red Bull and *The Simpsons* had just made their debuts, President Ronald Reagan made his famous “Tear down this wall!” speech in West Berlin, the world population was five billion, Colonel Qaddafi in Libya was playing godfather to terrorists, Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister of Britain, Gestapo boss Klaus Barbie was sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity, the first intifada was launched, and sports superstars Lionel Messi and Maria Sharapova were newborn babies.

It was 1987. The mere opening of accession negotiations with Turkey would take another 18 years. Another 12 years after that, everyone in Brussels and Ankara knows full well that Turkish membership in the EU is an impossibility for the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, the Turks think that 1) their country deserves full membership; and 2) the only reason the EU has not granted them membership is because they are Muslim. Few diagnoses could be as inaccurate as this.

Three decades after Turkey formally applied for membership, it stands at position 146 on the Global Peace Index and position 155 on the World Press Freedom Index. Here are some snippets illustrating how candidate Turkey looks 30 years after it applied for EU membership:

1. In May, Turkey's broadcasting watchdog fined two private broadcasters for the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show on New Year's Eve, at which models danced to Turkish music. The regulator said this is not "our tradition."
2. In April, the governor's office in the tourist resort of Antalya banned alcohol consumption in public.
3. In July, Turkish authorities confiscated about 50 properties (monasteries, cemeteries, and churches) belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church claiming that the ownership deeds had lapsed. The Syriacs are Turkey's oldest indigenous community.
4. In April, Turkish diplomats in Austria questioned an article in a school newspaper criticizing President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's handling of dissent and dissidents. The children's supplement of a regional newspaper published an article saying that Erdoğan "does not tolerate people who have a different opinion than he does. In recent months, he has put many of his opponents in jail."
5. In April, Turkish prosecutors started legal proceedings against journalists from a leading opposition newspaper on charges of supporting a terrorist organization and targeting Erdoğan through "asymmetric war methods." An indictment against the journalists demanded 43 years in jail.
6. In May, Erdoğan's bodyguards attacked and injured peaceful protesters in front of the Turkish ambassador's residence in Washington, an incident that caused uproar in America. Some US lawmakers suggested that arms shipments to NATO ally Turkey be halted.
7. In June, Erdoğan targeted Michael Rubin, an American Enterprise Institute scholar and former Pentagon official. Erdoğan pressured Twitter to shut down Rubin's account over critical comments he had made on the platform. Earlier in June, Erdoğan filed a complaint in a Turkish court accusing Rubin of threatening him and his family in his columns.
8. In July, hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered at an opposition rally in Istanbul, at which the main opposition leader called for Erdoğan's government to free jailed politicians, teachers, journalists, and others. The rally came after Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Social Democrat party [CHP], completed a 25-day, 440-km march from Ankara he dubbed the "March for Justice."
9. Kılıçdaroğlu's "March for Justice" was his response to a Turkish court which, in June, had sentenced CHP lawmaker Enis Berberoğlu to 25 years in jail on spying charges. Berberoğlu was accused of providing an opposition newspaper with video purporting to show details of Turkey's secret arms shipments to Islamist rebels in Syria. Erdoğan's government has denied the charges and claims the shipment contained humanitarian aid.

10. In July, the Britain-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International said Turkish authorities have detained its country director for Turkey amid a sweeping crackdown on dissent. Amnesty's country director was taken into custody with seven other human rights workers and two foreign trainers. They were arrested during a routine training event at a hotel near Istanbul. The detainees are being investigated for alleged membership in an armed terrorist organization.

Against this unpleasant backdrop, the European Parliament has called for Turkey's accession talks to be suspended if Ankara fully implements plans to expand Erdoğan's powers, which he narrowly won in a referendum on April 16. Although the parliament's vote is not binding, it illustrates the gulf that has grown between Ankara and Brussels.

The resolution passed by the parliament in Strasbourg "calls on the Commission and the member states ... to formally suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey without delay if the constitutional reform package is implemented unchanged."

If the object of the resolution was to rein Erdoğan in, it didn't work. He remains defiant. He said the majority of Turks did not "want the EU anymore", and the EU is not indispensable for Turkey.

For decades, Turkey and the EU have been the lead actors in a strange, not very amusing opera buffa. Turkey says it wants to join the club with no obligation to comply with membership rules. The club says it wants Turkey, although it knows full well that the applicant does not qualify. Turkey hopes the club rules will change; the club hopes the applicant will change. Neither will happen.

But both know that formally calling off the show will not benefit either party. In the curtains-down scenario, Turkey suffers economically and the EU faces an officially hostile Turkey (as opposed to today's unofficially hostile one). It could find itself suffering from Turkey's "nuisance value" (remember Turkish threats last year to "open the doors and send millions of immigrants to Europe.")

Regardless, the tedious round of mutual pretension is growing less sustainable by the day.

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