

Europe drove Turkey towards an autocrat. We cannot now turn our backs on his people



[WILLIAM HAGUE](#)

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Supporter of AK celebrates at the party headquarters in Ankara CREDIT: REUTERS

From opposite corners of our continent, Britain and Turkey have for some decades shared a similar perspective on the European land mass between us. Both have looked to Europe to boost their prosperity and, through NATO, to reinforce their common security. Both have an imperial past and a strong sense of independence, but have tried to find a way to work within the EU nonetheless – Turkey by applying to join it as long ago as 1987.

A Europe that could have held on to Britain and accommodated Turkey in its ranks would have contained crucial gateways to both the transatlantic world of the west and the Muslim and Asian worlds of the east. Indeed, the great vision of a fully democratic Muslim nation becoming permanently anchored in Europe was what

motivated British politicians to support EU membership for Turkey. This was a great strategic prize – the answer to any ‘clash of civilisations’, the proof that Islam and Christian democracies could join together, and a way of forcing the EU to be broad and decentralised at the same time.

Yet now the EU is not only losing Britain. [Sunday's referendum result and the events of recent years mean it has lost Turkey as well.](#) Albeit by a very narrow margin in a referendum in which airtime was systematically denied to the opposition side, Turkish voters approved a new constitution giving sweeping powers to President Erdogan and set their country clearly on the path to becoming an autocratic and probably authoritarian state.

To any outside and friendly observer, this is not good news. As foreign secretary I made more visits to Turkey than I can remember, worked closely with ministers in Ankara, encouraged their aspirations to join the EU alongside us, and admired the revival of the Turkish economy and an outward looking foreign policy in the early years of Erdogan. But now, [on the back of a failed coup used as a reason to purge and arrest tens of thousands of opponents,](#) the same man is leading his country down a dead end of intolerance, division and repression.

The result will be a weakened economy, as international confidence in the rule of law is diminished. Even worse, the concentration of such power in a more centralised state will make it harder to reconcile the many divisions between Turks who happen to be secular, or religious conservatives, or Kurds. Tens of thousands of people are in jail for political reasons, media outlets are ruthlessly intimidated, and a 51 per cent victory will now be treated as a mandate to implement everything the President desires. Excessive faith is being placed in one man, who shows all the signs familiar through the ages of having too much power for too long: paranoia, extreme sensitivity to criticism and the destruction of all potential successors. Few countries have ever become prosperous or happy places on the basis of such rule.

This prospect is deeply disheartening to Turkey's friends abroad. But it cannot be dismissed as just a random event brought about by one man and his cronies. The result in Turkey tells us some things that are very important about where the world is heading.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan casts his vote at a polling station for a referendum on the constitutional reform in Istanbul, Turkey, 16 April 2017. CREDIT:TOLGA BOZOGLU

It confirms, of course, that economic and political nationalism is on the rise. Buffeted by the economic pressures of globalisation and by terrorism and refugee flows – and Turkey has borne more than its share of those – many people are turning to a strong nation as the answer, with a forceful leader even if an unpredictable one. Just look at the United States.

It shows too that the dawn of the information age is not bringing about some inevitable triumph of liberal democracy, based on citizens receiving opinion and news from many sources and governments being unable to control what their voters hear and see. On the contrary, authoritarianism is doing well out of the rise of social media as state agencies and their allies exploit new ways to spread rumours, smears and distortions to ensure public opinion is on their side. Russia has become particularly adept at this and figures such as Erdogan are not slow to learn.

As Turkey pulls away from European standards of human rights and democracy, the result also reveals the waning power of the European Union to draw others into its orbit, and the rising attractions of the East. When Brussels finally opened accession negotiations for the Turks to join the EU in 2005, they were still being treated in many ways as supplicants, required to change their ways in order to enter a club to which they just had to belong. A dozen years of slow growth and endless euro crises later, the magnetism of Europe has been greatly weakened. In the meantime, China is leading the investment of vast sums into the so-called new Silk Roads – major new transport and energy links across central Asia. No longer do all roads lead to the west.

A final lesson is that Europe's collective mishandling of Turkey has been tragic. Year after year vital parts of Ankara's accession negotiations were blocked, usually in Paris, Athens or Nicosia. Turkey was kept at a distance and obstructed in its efforts to become a European state, until eventually it has turned away, disillusioned and contemptuous. The EU could have embraced Turkey, just as it could probably have kept Britain as a member if it had been prepared to make compromises on migration. It lacks the collective will to do what is necessary for its own success.



Leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Kemal Kilicdaroglu speaks to media after casting his vote in the constitutional referendum at a polling station in Ankara on April 16, 2017. CREDIT: ADEM ALTAN

The result of the referendum should therefore not be seen as Turks taking leave of their senses for reasons of their own, but as one manifestation of wider trends and failures, in their country but also around them. And that also means we must not turn our backs on them. They remain pivotal in resolving the war in Syria, and in attempting to manage flows of migration that seem destined to grow much larger. They are a vital ally and sit in one of the most strategically crucial points of the entire globe.

Even though they have voted to place their faith in one man in a way that British people think we never could, we still have a lot in common with the Turkish people. We should be sad for them this week. But, for the long-term, we should keep open to them our trade, alliances, understanding and friendship.

