A graveyard of ambition

Turkeyis where European foreign policywentto die

O

NE ofTurkey’smore forlorn sightsistucked down an Ankara

side streetinside the EUaffairsministry. Atthe top of a small

staircase lurks a poster depicting a sprawling tree, its lower

branchesbereftand leaflessbutitstop halfa lush burst ofgreen-

ery. Acaption explainsthe symbolism: “Let’sbringa dynamicin-

dustry, youngworkforce and unique cultural diversityto freshen

and revive the European Union. BywelcomingTurkey.”

This relic speaks of a happier time, when Turkey was confi-

dent enough in its bid for EU membership to present itself as a

tonic to a tired continent. Travel around the country today, as

Charlemagne did last weekon a trip organised by the European

Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank, and you encounter a

differentmood. FormanyTurksopposed to the rulingJustice and

Development(AK) party, the EU’sname meansbetrayal.

In Istanbul liberalslamentthatEurope turnsa blind eye to the

authoritarian habitsofRecep Tayyip Erdogan, a presidentwith a

penchantforbeatingup journalistsand tamperingwith the judi-

ciary. Refugees in Gaziantep, near Syria, do not understand why

Germanyworriesmore aboutthe migrantsreachingrich Europe

than the hundreds of thousands of Syrians facing death at the

hands ofBashar al-Assad and his Russian enablers. Kurds in the

south-eastsaythatAngela Merkel, Germany’schancellor, ignores

the plightoftownslike Cizre, besieged byTurkish troops.

Little wonderthey feel let down. Turkey’s south-east is a sim-

mering cauldron of violence. Since last summer Turkish forces

and young rebels affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party

(PKK) have been locked in a spiral of violence that has left hun-

dredsofciviliansdead. Citiesare in lockdown; in Diyarbakir the

airisthickwith teargasand the crump ofartillery. Locals warn of

furtherescalation in the spring, when battle-hardened fighters of

the PKKleave theirwinterredoubtsin northern Iraq.

Elsewhere MrErdogan continueshisauthoritarian march. Be-

setbyallegationsofcorruption in AK and opposed byformeral-

lies, he is single-mindedly pursuing a constitutional change that

would extend the powers ofhis presidency. Terrified journalists

censorthemselvesbefore governmentgoonsdo itforthem. Pub-

liccontractsreward friends; foesare fined forsupposed taxviola-

tions. Turkey’spolitical and ethniccleavagesgroweverwider.

Meanwhile the region is aflame. The fighting around Aleppo

(see page 34), overthe Syrian border, hascreated a fresh stream of

refugees. Desperate to stop Syrian Kurds from expanding their

territory along the border, Turkey has begun shelling their posi-

tions. Russia’sescalation, and itsalliance ofconvenience with the

Kurds, has weakened Turkey’s hand. Mr Erdogan’s war ofwords

with VladimirPutin isdangerouslyheated. Meanwhile America,

a NATO ally, rejects Turkish demands that it disown the Syrian

Kurds, who are useful in fighting Islamic State (IS). A car bomb

which killed at least 28 people in Ankara on February 17th

showed thatthe violence isspreadingto Turkey’sheartland.

Itiseasyto see whyEurope’srefugee problem mightnotbe at

the top ofTurkey’s in-tray. Europeans optimistically say that Tur-

key’s troubles present them with an opening, for Mr Erdogan

needs friends. But that misreads the view from Ankara. In Syria

Mr Erdogan wants to smash the Kurds and hold the line against

Mr Assad; at home he seeks to consolidate his rule and squeeze

the opposition. The EUisnotable to help him achieve these goals.

And so, while leaders like Mrs Merkel (rightly) praise Turkey for

welcoming2.5m Syriansonto itssoil and expresssympathy forits

strategic predicament, Mr Erdogan responds with insults and

threatensto busmillionsofrefugeesto Greece and Bulgaria.

The Europeanswill have to acceptsuch tough talkin their bid

to secure Turkish help to reduce the migrant flow. The EU’s pro-

mise ofvisa-free travel forTurksin exchange fora cut in the num-

berofmigrants, agreed onlate lastyear, isa genuine prize forthe

Turks(“VisitingGermanyisharderthan buyingland in heaven,”

says one). But Europe is in a rush, and Mr Erdogan is not. Hence

Mrs Merkel’s endless meetings with Turkish officials. Hence the

EU’s willingness to overlook Mr Erdogan’s excesses. And hence

the sense ofbetrayal amonghisdomesticantagonists. “We need

pressure from outside,” says Firat Anli, the co-mayorofDiyarba-

kir. “Otherwise we see where the state’sreflexeslead.”

An insincere invitation

In thistelling, the Europeansmightbe able to bluntMr Erdogan’s

sharper edges if only they were brave enough to shed their hy-

pocrisies. Certainlythe EUwasonce a force in Turkish politics. In

the earlyyearsofAK rule itwasa useful anchorforMrErdogan’s

economicand legal reforms, and an allyin hisbattle against Tur-

key’sold secularelite and theirfriendsin the army.

Yetthe EUlostitscloutyearsago. Soon aftermembership talks

began in 2005, Turkey fell victim to the sharp tongue of Nicolas

Sarkozy, a former (and possible future) French president who

once dismissed Turkey as part of “Asia Minor”, and the veto-

wielding Cypriot government, which was let into the EU before

solving its own Turkish problem. When Turkish citizens realised

that accession was going nowhere, they lost interest. And once

MrErdogan had gotwhathe wanted from the process, he discard-

ed itand moved on. Pro-EUTurkswere leftadrift.

Theyhave notlosthope. Supportformembership isclimbing

asMrErdogan tightenshisgrip, and atleastTurkeyand Europe are

talkingagain. Turkey’slocal troubleshave leftitmore dependent

on EU markets and investment. Even the stand-off on Cyprus

may be near a solution. Had Europe pledged a decade ago to al-

low Turkey’s application to go forward, and convinced Ankara

(and itself) thatmembership wasa realisticprospect, it mightnot

find itselfso helplesstoday. Lastyear’sdeal mayhave been grub-

by and it may turn out to be pointless, but by the time it was

signed, the EUhad nothingleftto lose. Itishard to think ofa stron-

gerindictmentofEurope’sforeign policy.