Turkey and the West: David Barchard

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and admirers of David Barchard.

Thank you to David Shankland, the chair of the Anglo-Turkish Society, for inviting me to take part in this memorial day for David Barchard and to make these opening remarks at the session about Turkey and the European Union. It is also a singular honour to share the platform with Sir Kieran Prendergast.

I first met David in January 1985, having just started work as the lowest form of life in the chancery at the British Embassy in Ankara, the post's solitary third secretary.

In those days, the embassy was rather smaller than it is today. We all had to multi-task, so as well as being the political section's gofer, I was also the embassy's press attache. Which is how my wife and I met David, who then was writing for the Financial Times and occasionally the BBC.

Quite early on in our friendship, once David realised that we, like him, were Roman Catholics, David offered to take us to a church where mass was being said in Turkish. The church turned out to be in a back street somewhere in Ulus, which I never found again. David whispered in my ear that most of the congregation were Armenians and those that weren't belonged to MIT.

This episode captured a number of David's charateristics. First, his generosity of spirit in going out of his way to be helpful and welcoming to new arrivals. Second, his knowledge of obscure and esoteric details of Turkish society; nobody else had known about the church. Third, a slight tendency to see the sinister side in an everyday activity, like going to church – unless the reference to MIT was a joke.

We saw quite a bit of each other over the next three years. Like others, we enjoyed David's stimulating company enormously and became firm friends. Professionally, I benefited hugely from his wisdom, knowledge and insights.

When I returned to Ankara as ambassador in 2018, David and I had stayed in touch in the intervening years sufficiently for him to visit us on his way to or from Cappadocia and to include me in the circulation of his astonishingly well informed and erudite emails about contemporary events in Turkey.

At times, he seemed able to follow, from his home in Yorkshire and all by himself, the twists and turns of Turkey 's domestic affairs better than I could with the support of a small army of officials.

As we all know, one of David's most strongly held beliefs was the importance of Turkey fulfilling the vision of the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and increasingly integrating itself into the West and adopting the freedoms and disciplines of a Western liberal democracy.

During the Cold War, the emphasis was on Turkey's NATO membership, though we shouldn't overlook that Turkey was also a founder member of the Council of Europe. Having the second largest armed forces in NATO and a land border with the Soviet Union meant that Turkey made a highly valuable contribution to the alliance's deterrence posture vis-à-vis the Kremlin.

But after the end of the Cold War, closer relations with and eventually membership of the EU became the much sought-after prize. The seed had been sewn in 1963 when Turkey signed its Association Agreement with the then European Economic Community. That agreement envisaged the possibility of Turkey joining the EEC one day. The Turks have always argued since then

that they have a contractual agreement with the EEC that they should belong inside the European family of free nations.

The Commission have also accepted the point. Even when they responded to Turkey's application to join in 1987, by saying Turkey was not ready for the opening of membership negotiations, the Commission acknowledged Turkey's eligibility to accede to the bloc when the conditions were right and suggested the matter should be revisited in 1995.

That contrasted with the Commission's dismissal of an application from Morocco in the same year where the Commission spelled out that Morocco was geographically not a European country and therefore ineligible.

So the issue of principle – that Turkey had the right to attempt to join the EU – was not in doubt. The borders of Europe did not stop at the edge of western Thrace or in the Aegean Sea.

David set out the advantages to Turkey of membership in a short book called 'Building a partnership, Turkey and the European Union' published in 2000 and written in the wake of the decision by EU heads to grant Turkey the status of a candidate country. It felt, at the time, like a real breakthrough had been achieved.

David listed those advantages as 'higher standards of living, freedom to engage in travel and dialogue, not only with the advanced industrial countries of western Europe from which Turks are largely shut out at the moment, but also other Mediterranean countries.'

He added that 'EU membership could also help resolve many of Turkey's deepest preoccupations. Its external security situation would look quite different inside the European Union…Internal order would be better guaranteed.' Turkey could follow the examples of Portugal,

Greece and Spain, three EU member states dogged by fierce polarisation until they joined the EU.

Turkish membership would also bring significant benefits to the EU, David believed. In his monograph on Turkey and the European Union, published in early 1998, David wrote that: 'Turkey's visibility and impact on Europe are rising steadily. A generation ago, Turkey mattered because of its military and strategic importance. Today Turkey touches Europe in virtually every domain.'

'There is no other East European or Near Eastern country (with the possible exception of Israel),' David continued, 'whose internal problems are so likely to spill out in ways harmful to western interests. Thus the EU's ties to Turkey should be as close as possible and it should be firmly integrated into the life of Europe."

In other words, according to David, it was manifestly in the interests of both the EU and Turkey that Ankara's ambition for the country to become a member state should succeed. To use David's words again, 'the move to include Turkey within the greater European Union now being constructed may be essential to the long term stability and prosperity of the region, not least since Turkey, more precisely Istanbul and its hinterland, has returned to its ancient role of economic hub of southeast Europe.'

In the 20 plus years since David wrote his monographs, Turkey's importance to the West has increased as Turkey's neighbourhood has become more unstable. The end of the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Union, the US-led interventions in Kuwait and Iraq, the series of wars in Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring have unleashed huge nationalist, religious fundamentalist and revolutionary social forces that have shaken the region.

In September 2014, the then British Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, referred to the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine as constituting an arc of instability for Europe.

To those conflicts, one could add Nagorno Karabakh, Libya and Israel/Palestine, as well as the slow-moving collapse of the administration in Lebanon and the periodic spikes in tension in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey has troops on the ground in Cyprus, Iraq, Syria and Libya. It has provided weapons and other defence materiel to Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Its diplomats are active in all the conflicts and regional tensions I have mentioned. Crucially for the EU and Britain, Turkey absorbs and tempers much of the consequences of instability in its region and cushions those countries to its west from the worse effects.

A stark example of one of these consequences of regional instability is irregular migration. Turkey, following its agreement in March 2016 with the EU, is essentially expected to guard the EU's south-eastern border, from the outside, preventing people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and other countries moving clandestinely into Greece and onwards to other EU member states.

The burden Turkey bears in doing this is considerable. It is home to perhaps, at a conservative estimate, 5 million irregular migrants. The majority of them are Syrians, integrated at a significant cost into Turkey's education, health, housing and social security systems.

In return, the EU pays an amount towards these costs. 6 billion Euros was foreseen in the 2016 agreement. EU leaders decided to add another 3 billion Euos in June 2021. But although those numbers look large they are almost certainly less than the costs to the Turkish exchequer of Turkey hosting so many refugees.

We owe Turkey a great debt of gratitude for its generosity in hosting so many refugees and should not be surprised when its patience in doing so is occasionally tested to the limit. And it is a pity that sometimes the only issue on which the dialogue between the EU and Turkey has looked serious and purposeful in recent times has been irregular migration.

It should be self-evident that the EU and those western European countries not in the bloc, such as the UK, that try to play a stabilising and constructive international role should try to work as closely as possible with the Turks on all those regional issues where Ankara is generally more engaged and more influential – because they are closer to the action - than we are.

It seems odd that the dialogue between Brussels and Ankara on international affairs is not closer. The Turkish foreign minister is still not invited to the informal meetings of EU foreign ministers, the Gymnichs, despite the normal practice being to invite the foreign ministers of candidate countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, when David wrote his paper on Turkey and the EU he foresaw a number of problems that would need to be resolved before Turkey might, one day in the future, advance its case.

These included the strength of its economy, the quality of its democracy including human rights and the rule of law, Islamism versus secularism, the PKK and the Kurds, and the stance of three key EU states - Cyprus, Greece and Germany - towards Turkish membership ambitions.

It might be interesting to look at some of these briefly.

On the economy, David was broadly optimistic.

That optimism was based on the known strengths of the Turkish economy – a large, productive agricultural sector, the huge potential for tourism, a well-trained and disciplined industrial workforce and, since 1995, seamless access to the EU single market for manufactured goods through its bespoke customs union with the EU. Turkey's economy was well ahead of those of the countries of central Europe in the early 2000s, which were applying to join the bloc at the same time.

That is not to claim that everything in Turkey's economic garden was rosy. Inflation was very high in the late 1990s and is again today. Per capita income was much lower than the European average. The difference in wealth between the industrialised west of the country and the largely agricultural east and south east was striking. But these problems all seemed fixable in the light of the rapid transformation of the Turkish economy taking place in the late 1990s.

In 1998, David observed that 'the customs union between Turkey and the EU had for the most part worked much better than anyone dared hope…This is a remarkable tribute to the progress made by the Turkish economy.'

That transformational progress continued in the early years of the AKP government. In 2001, according to the IMF, GDP per capita was just over $3,000. By 2013, it had reached $12,500 – in other words it had more than quadrupled.

However, as observers of Turkey know all too well, the years afterward 2013 proved more difficult. The causes are various. The end of the PKK's ceasefire in 2015, the failed 2016 coup and the clampdown afterwards, the move to a presidential system with weak institutions, Russian economic sanctions, President Trump's threats to the economy and Turkey's own idiosyncratic economic management of recent years have all played their part in spooking the markets.

Consequently, by 2020, GDP per capita had fallen to $8.600. Things look better now, however, as that figure has recently ticked up and stands at $13,400. That means today Turkey ranks slightly higher than Bulgaria in GDP per capita but below all the other 26 EU member states. Turkey's GDP per capita is only about one third of the EU average.

These figures, however, reflect current foreign exchange rates. Ankara might argue that, given the dramatic fall of the Turkish Lira against the dollar in the last 5 years, that measure unfairly depresses the wealth of Turks and comparisons based on purchasing power parity would indicate a smaller gap.

Ironically, it's a Turkish-American academic, Professor Daron Acemoglu, who co-wrote with James Robinson, 'Why nations fail', the textbook on the connection between bad governance, weak institutions and economic collapse, who has pointed out the path forwards that Turkey needs to avoid.

The appointment of Mehmet Simsek as finance and economy minister after the May election has been heralded by some as the return to rational economic policy making. Whether he and the new governor of the Central Bank will be given the time and freedom of manoeuvre to turn things around is moot. The markets remain to be convinced and local elections next Spring are not an ideal backdrop for fiscal discipline. But given the inherent strengths of the Turkish economy, this is an area where the right policies and strong, independent institutions should in the medium to long term bear fruit.

It's more difficult to be similarly optimistic when considering the state of Turkey's democracy, human rights and the rule of law. David argued in the late 1990s and the early 2000s that things looked

worse from outside the country than they appeared to the ordinary Turk on the Kadikoy ferry.

It is true that, especially thanks to social media, the visitor to Turkey is struck by how lively and colourful debate in the country appears. There is plenty of criticism of government policies, if that is an indication of the health of democratic debate and elections are genuinely competitive, even if the playing field for campaigning is heavily tilted in the government's favour.

Significant progress was made in the first decade of the AKP government on human rights. Torture that had been systematic was largely eradicated. The death penalty was abolished in 2004.

Attainment of the Copenhagen political criteria – that Turkey should be a stable democracy that applied the rule of law - looked within reach and that was the basis on which the EU agreed in 2004 to start membership negotiations with Turkey. But from the suppression of the 2013 Gezi Park protests onwards, the direction of travel on human rights and the rule of law, though by no means in a straight line at all times, has been generally in the wrong direction. The state of emergency measures taken after the 2016 failed coup accelerated that trend. The present Turkish administration no longer argues that it is trying to meet the Copenhagen criteria.

But David would not lay all the blame for this democratic backsliding at Ankara's feet. He always argued that the EU needed to give Turkey encouragement to make the profound changes required for membership.

By and large, that encouragement was not forthcoming. The EU did not invite Turkey to any of its summits after 2004 until the migration crisis in 2016. And France passed a law, aimed at Turkey, that required a referendum before France could agree to any more countries joining the EU.

Worse, although accession negotiations formally began in 2005, they were handicapped and then effectively sabotaged by some member states who either didn't want Turkey ever to join or wanted to put pressure on Turkey over Cyprus. As early as 2007, the Commissioner in charge of enlargement warned of an impending train crash in the accession negotiations with Turkey.

David deprecated the position of President Sarkozy that Turkey's joining the EU was unthinkable or of Chancellor Merkel that Turkey should have a privileged partnership with the EU instead of membership.

Despite the UK's support for Turkish membership in principle, even David Cameron, in the white heat of the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016, argued that Turkey's joining the EU was not going to happen.

A more serious spanner in the works of Turkey's accession plans was wielded by Cyprus. David saw this coming. In 1998, he argued that 'the European decision to negotiate the entry of Cyprus to the EU has all the hallmarks of a historical blunder. If the EU admitted Cyprus it would be putting the wishes of a micro-state of 650,000 people, of little strategic value, above those of a crucial strategic and trading partner with a population a hundred times larger.'

David did not expect his warnings to be heeded, however. He also wrote that it seemed 'most likely that, despite many hesitations, the EU will eventually admit the Greek Cypriots, thereby importing the Cyprus dispute into its own body.'

'The effect of Cyprus' accession may be to divide the island permanently' David added, 'and to bring the EU into permanent confrontation with Turkey'.

This proved to be, sadly, a remarkably prescient prophecy of what the future would hold. Many Europeans would agree today that allowing Cyprus to join, without the condition that it should first have supported the UNSG's plan for resolving the division of the island in a referendum, was a strategic error that has dripped poison into relations between the EU and Turkey and led to a state of affairs where Ankara no longer sees any future in a bizonal, bicommunal federation between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

The Greek Cypriots and indeed the present Greek government have largely succeeded in making their bilateral problems with Turkey the EU's problems with Turkey. Although this helps self-confidence in Nicosia and Athens in dealing with the Turks, it does not actually help the search for solutions to their disputes with Ankara since it removes much of the feeling that compromises are required.

Unfortunately, the internal dynamic of the EU, where one member state may need another's support at any time on an issue crucial to itself means that member states try hard to avoid annoying their fellow member states – they never know when they might need them - which in turn means that they will rarely put pressure on a member state to resile from a strongly held position of in its relations with a third country since a third country, by definition, doesn't have voting rights within the EU.

Although the formal position of the Greek government since the summer of 1999 is that it supports Turkey's wish to join the EU since accession would change Turkey into a less threatening neighbour, in practice, the government of Mr Mitsotakis cannot afford to ignore the hardline nationalist views of the right in Greek politics. So Athens oscillates between moments of calm reason and high dudgeon in its stance towards Ankara, which hardly serves its long term interests or the EU's relations with Turkey.

The increasingly clear pro-Greek positions over their disputes with Turkey taken by the French government and increasingly in Washington do not encourage Athens to adopt a less nationalist stance towards Turkey and may be fuelling further the sentiment in Athens that compromise with Ankara is unnecessary.

As David pointed out: 'the admission of Greece (to the EU) in 1981 was followed by an upsurge of ultra-nationalist politics in Greece, which might not have happened without EU membership making that country more secure and self-confident'.

There have been recently slightly more encouraging signs that both parties in the relationship recognise they are heading into a strategic dead end and need to find a way out. Competing nationalisms in the Eastern Mediterranean and the tensions they create unsettle investors, to give but one reason for everyone to try to find common ground.

As for the Kurdish issue in Turkey, it seems very unlikely that the hold that Turkish nationalism has, at the moment, in Ankara will allow a return to the 2013-15 peace process. The Turkish state has essentially defeated the PKK inside Turkey and seems determined to take the fight to the PKK in northern Iraq and Syria. And the political party most popular amongst the Kurds in southeast Turkey, now known as HEDEP, continues to be accused by pro-government news outlets of being hand in glove with the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organisation.

Experience suggests that making peace with the PKK in 2013-15 seemed to lose the AKP votes, while going all out to defeat them militarily is popular. It is often said that President Erdogan can persuade his followers to support him in any policy he chooses. But some acts of persuasion are undoubtedly more difficult than others.

An area where David seemed to me to be more pessimistic than necessary was on the government's Islamist agenda. He was very

worried at the growing influence of puritanical versions of Islam inside some of Turkey's ministries and he saw an active plan to roll back the secular norms established by Ataturk. The world of Islamic sects and 'tarikats' in Turkey was one he understood better than any other non-Turk I met.

For what its worth, my observation most recently in Turkey was that the draw of a secular lifestyle continued to look more attractive than a conservatively religious one to young people and to those living in cities. Ataturk is as popular a figure across the political spectrum in Turkey, especially among the young, as he ever was.

If the AKP government once had an Islamist agenda, it no longer seems to me, at least, being pursued much beyond the odd gesture – such as the return of Aya Sofya to being a mosque again. The secular constitution continues to be lauded as a great achievement of the Republic. The likelihood of Turkey adopting Sharia law seems remote in the extreme.

So where does all this leave EU-Turkey relations today? It's hard not to sound rather negative. The accession negotiations are moribund, though neither side wants to the one that declares the corpse dead.

Selim Yenel, a former Turkish ambassador to the EU who now heads the Global Relations Forum think-tank in Istanbul, has recently argued that Turkey should stop pursuing EU membership, which the EU will always find a reason to prevent, and focus on other goals such as visa exemption, updating the customs union and foreign policy and defence cooperation.

For its part, Turkey should take steps to protect its democracy, uphold the rule of law and implement the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights.

Whether even that limited set of goals is achievable in the present circumstances is moot. Cyprus, supported by some other member states, is likely to ask Turkey to pay a price for opening customs union negotiations that Ankara will refuse, even though a modernised customs union would be in both sides' interests.

And it is an open question whether Turkey's authoritarian trend will be reversed or whether high profile prisoners like Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtas will be released in line with rulings by the European Court of Human Rights.

However, since it is clearly in both sides' interests to cooperate where they can find common ground in the light of the huge challenges the world faces and for the mutual security and prosperity of their peoples, one must hope that pragmatism will win through.

The alternative is what David described in his paper, published in the year 2000, of an Accession Partnership process that had 'stopped being a partnership in practice and become a political contest, dominated by pressures and confrontations'.

That's not the future David wanted for Europe or Turkey. Escaping that future is the challenge governments and diplomats of good will must now embrace.

Thank you.