

Visa restrictions are shutting Turkey out of the EU

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Istanbul enjoyed the honour of being recognised as the European capital of culture in 2010, and the European capital of sports this year. Such events not only highlight Turkey's strong national identity and fundamental European values, but also show how this culturally diverse and geographically unique place defies categorisation, straddling east and west, custom and modernity – and is the quintessential European city.

Although Turkey was built on thousands of years of history, this relatively young nation has repeatedly displayed its enthusiasm towards, as Victor Hugo called it in 1848, "a European brotherhood" in which the "distinct qualities and glorious individuality" of the nation is not lost. And Istanbul is a reminder to European Union policymakers that the continent is less without Turkey.

The past two years have shown potential for the continual success of Turkish-EU relations and the prospects for stronger collaborations in the cultural, economic and political spheres. The recent Europe Day celebrations in Ankara were testimony to our commitment towards this end. Both the European and Asian shores of Turkey, with their dynamic, young and optimistic populations, have long been waiting for and working towards EU membership. So it is discouraging to hear echoes from Europe claiming that Turkey is "too big, too poor and too Muslim" to fit in.

Rhetoric of this nature is outdated. Yes, Turkey is big relative to most EU member states, but this is one of the reasons Turkey is on its way towards becoming one of the world's top 10 economies. As for the "too Muslim" part, Turkey is a secular state. The Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, praised the value of secularism and democracy to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya after attending Friday prayers in Tripoli last September. It should be recalled that these values are complementary, not mutually exclusive; Turkey is and hopes to remain a source of inspiration in the Muslim world.

Unfortunately, the imposition of the Schengen visa requirement on Turkish citizens remains a serious obstacle for us. As the minister for EU affairs, it is my responsibility and privilege to break down the wall that is impeding Turkey's EU accession, one brick at a time. In addition to bricks of prejudice, politics and bureaucracy, the perception that Turkish citizens will engage in mass migration to Europe if the visa requirement is eliminated is baseless, and offensive. Turkish tourists, students, artists, merchants and businesspeople who have neither desire nor interest in migrating to the EU are being subject to a discriminatory and high-cost, low-value visa regime. It should come as no surprise that Turks have even begun moving out of Germany in the hope of finding better employment opportunities back home.

Turkey is the only EU candidate country to be kept outside the Schengen zone. Even non-candidate countries such as Russia, the Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are currently negotiating for visa-free travel. Recent verdicts of the EU court of justice and the national

courts of some member states, namely the Hannover and Munich courts of Germany and Haarlem court of the Netherlands, have ruled that Turkish nationals have the right to visa-free travel. Why, then, are we still being ostracised?

A European-contrived mass exodus scenario of Turks rushing to EU countries as economic refugees is absurd and distorts the realities of our nation's development. Thanks to Turkey's substantial economic growth, we are more likely to witness quite the opposite.

If the size of Turkey's population is the justification, then how can the exemption from EU visas of millions of citizens of the western Balkan countries, or 200 million Brazilians or 120 million Mexicans be explained?

Moreover, Turkey is the only EU candidate country that has broken down commercial borders with the EU. Under the Customs Union, goods made in Turkey are able to flow freely into the union, but the people who make them are not. What we are asking for is the mutual freedom of movement between our borders and those of our neighbours with whom we are meant to be synchronising, not drifting apart. Our tourists are certainly not demanding employment permits or other social rights that are tailored exclusively for EU nationals. Given the ongoing economic crisis in Europe, allowing for freer and easier travel would undoubtedly benefit the economies of hard-hit European countries as well, such as neighbouring Greece.

In the meantime, it is disappointing to witness that in some member states, a visa regime, immigration policies and any topic regarding Turkey is abused for domestic political demagoguery. Still, plenty of European citizens and political leaders admit that the visa-free travel of Turks would not have any adverse effects on EU countries.

I hope common sense will prevail soon, and that the archaic and discriminatory visa regime will be discarded. That will only be one less brick on the wall, albeit an important one.