

THE REFERENDUM HERALDS A NEW EUROPE

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At the end of June 2014, when I left my position as the Ambassador to the United Kingdom to which I was appointed in mid-July 2010, it hardly occurred to me that the UK would resolve to exit the European Union.

In fact, upon saying farewell to my friends in the UK, the country that gave Turkey the biggest support in its EU membership bid, I told them, in a confident manner, not to leave the Union before we joined it.

Most of my colleagues neither wanted nor expected such an outcome. As the election neared, those considering withdrawal as a credible possibility had increased in number; however, everyone hoped that common sense would prevail at the polls, with a decision to remain, just like at the 2014 referendum in Scotland. The whole world was surprised and shocked by the outcome of the June 23 referendum expressing a wish to leave the EU.

FEAR OF IMMIGRATION AS THE DETERMINING FACTOR

The primary reason behind this outcome is the fear of immigration among the British. The granting of the right to freedom of movement to citizens of Bulgaria and Romania, which became EU members in 2007, was postponed until January 1, 2014. This issue sparked a major debate in the UK in mid-2013. Those in favor of blocking the right to free movement of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens raised their voices. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), known for its anti-EU stance and its populist rhetoric exploiting immigration issues, triggered the polarization of politics through xenophobia.

PM Cameron deemed necessary a change in the political discourse of the Conservative Party to avoid losing votes to UKIP in the May 2015 general elections. He pledged to hold a referendum on whether to stay in the EU in case he won the elections. At the same time, he promised a serious set of negotiations with the EU in order to place limits to European immigration policies. He thereby hoped to prevent the Conservative Party's anti-EU line from causing an intra-party split and to prevent loss of votes to UKIP. These promises led the Conservative Party to win majority in the 2015 elections. The dice, however, were cast. Over the process leading up to the referendum, the increase in immigration movements, concerns over Syrian refugees and the issue of free movement played a significant part in the UK's decision to leave the EU.

Even claims suggesting that "the UK would be inundated with Turkish citizens due to the freedom of movement if Turkey becomes an EU member" were featured in the "No to the EU" campaign. The current situation indicates that not only the UK but the EU itself, without the UK, will also adopt a more restrictive approach with regards to immigration policies and the issue of free movement. The result of the June 23 referendum does not mean the UK will exit the EU immediately. In line with the provisions of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, withdrawal negotiations will be held between the EU and any member state that resolves to withdraw from the Union and the negotiations need to be concluded within a period of two years. The membership rights and liabilities of the country requesting withdrawal

will not be subject to any changes until the negotiations are concluded. It is interesting to note that the UK will be the EU term president in the second half of 2017. Let's see how this dilemma will unfold...

HOW WILL TURKEY BE AFFECTED?

The outcome of the referendum is hardly favorable for Turkey. The EU will have to review what kind of structural transformations it will need to implement in order to sustain its existence in the coming years. This in turn will have a significant impact on Turkey's membership negotiations. There may also be disruptions to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations between the US and the EU, and in the review process of Turkey's Customs Union with the EU.

It needs to be mentioned that the UK's decision to leave was as much a result of the centralized and regulatory tendencies in economic and financial decision-making bodies of the EU as it was of immigration, refugee issues and free movement. The UK rejected the notion of transfer of national sovereignties to the EU, it was against the idea of a federal political union, and considered the EU more as an economic union.

The majority of EU member states presumed that the UK supported Turkish accession because Turkey's policy preferences on national sovereignty and transfer of authority are similar to those of her own. From now on, we will have to continue membership negotiations with an EU that does not include the UK as a member and, thus, without the UK's support.

Such an EU would not wish to keep Turkey's accession process alive unless it is completely clear about what Turkey expects from becoming a member of the EU, and which practices she is willing to internalize and accept. It is also possible for Turkey to face further conditions, in addition to the Copenhagen Criteria, due to a forthcoming structural transition process of the EU. As nationalist tendencies are again on the rise all over Europe, we may expect the EU to enter an introverted period where integration and deepening are favored over enlargement.

A new Europe is in the making, no matter how one approaches the matter. Unless Turkey participates in the laying of its building blocks, she will have a hard time entering it once the structure is constructed.

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