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For some in Britain, slagging off the European Union (something I am about to do for the next 900 words) is an instinctive act of patriotic faith, akin to not knowing the second verse of the National Anthem. For many of us, the EU remains a quasi-democratic institution in search of an electorate. Quite tellingly, we tend to see the EU not so much as a vehicle for change as a means of registering a protest vote. Remember Robert Kilroy-Silk? Who can forget a tan like that? Britons loved him so much that we voted for him to leave the country five days a week, to spend that time in a place he says he despises.

The EU has become adept at dealing with its many problems and crises. By which I mean it ignores them and hopes they will go away. The EU constitution is a case in point. However, there is one problem that is resolutely not going away and is going to get worse: that is, Turkey's membership. The patrician consensus is that Turkey joining would be a jolly good thing as having a Muslim state in the EU would bring all sorts of benefits. However, Turkey's membership is dependent on the country introducing significant reforms – including many in the area of minorities' rights, eradicating the role of the military in the running of the state and bringing democratic procedures into the institutions of the country.

So far, Turkey has failed to come up to scratch, but more importantly the EU has allowed this situation to continue. The deal was this: Turkey is allowed into the EU but the EU gets to monitor and investigate human-rights abuses and pressurise Turkey to reform. Neither side has kept to the deal.

The Kurdish region of Turkey has suffered a steep rise in violence over the past weeks, with a huge deployment of troops against the civilian population. The Turkish police and military have attacked demonstrators using tear gas, batons, tanks and other lethal weapons. The Kurdish cities have seen a de facto return to state-of-emergency rule. Significant numbers of Kurdish trade unionists, human-rights defenders and political activists have been imprisoned, many of them shot and wounded by troops. Across the Kurdish region, at least 15 people have died, including three children, aged three, six and nine. Reports from human-rights defenders state that some of those killed were shot in the head at close range, suggesting execution.

The mayor of Diyarbakir, who tried to mediate between the authorities and protesters, has been physically attacked by the military, which has called for his suspension. And democratic Kurdish parties are being raided and their members imprisoned. How did it return to this so quickly?

The events that led to this escalation started with the funeral, on 28 March, of four PKK guerrillas, attended by a crowd of between 20,000 and 30,000 Kurds. After provocation from the local police, mourners clashed with the authorities and troops were called in.

However, the real motor at work has been the failure of the Turkish state to work with the Kurds to take advantage of the PKK ceasefire. Ankara has refused to negotiate. "We will not talk to terrorists," the prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, declares. And he has done so with the backing of the EU. Instead of urging dialogue, the EU has followed the UK and the United States in proscribing the PKK, even though it announced a ceasefire and formally renounced violence. Just about every attempt by grass-roots Kurdish groups to form inclusive democratic movements has been regarded by the EU and the UK as merely another group to add to the list of terrorist organisations. At the same time, unemployment, poverty and political stagnation have fuelled the clashes between Kurds and the Turkish state.

With the region threatening to return to the bad old days of the mid-1990s, when 3,500 Kurdish villages were destroyed, 30,000 people killed and over a million Kurds internally displaced, the EU simply has to intervene. If the deal is that Turkey gets to join if it respects minority rights and introduces democracy to the institutions of the state, what happens if it breaks the deal? At the moment, the penalty is . . . nothing.

The British media tend to regard Turkey through the lens of bird flu and the occasional bomb, though in tabloid terms Turkey is strictly sick chickens. Occasionally, the broadsheets will rally round a cause célèbre, such as the case of the internationally renowned writer Orhan Pamuk. When he was threatened with prison for mentioning the Armenian genocide, the literary world rushed to his defence. But the trouble with causes célèbres is that once the celeb has gone, little attention remains on the cause.

It is doubtful that Eren Keskin will get the same press attention. Keskin was the founder of the Legal Aid Office for the Victims of Sexual Harassment and Rape in Custody. When I met her in 2001, her Istanbul office was cramped and insalubrious. She talked about how Kurdish women had to endure sexual harassment and rape at the hands of the Turkish authorities. In 2002, she gave a lecture in Germany describing her work and the horrific scale of rape in custody in Turkey. For daring to speak about this, she was put on trial back home. This year, she was sentenced to ten months for the crime of "insulting the moral character of the military".