



## THE SULTANS OF SWING

TURKEY'S STANCE ON INTEGRATION  
WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

Szymon Ananicz

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## SUMMARY

## THE PERCEPTION OF EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF TURKEY'S EUROPEAN POLICY /39

## KEY POINTS

- Despite a rise in anti-EU rhetoric and a growing assertiveness in Ankara's relations with Brussels, Turkey will continue to seek closer integration with the European Union in the coming years. The current stalemate in the accession process has been a source of irritation to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government. Nonetheless, a complete collapse of accession talks would be a much worse scenario for the ruling AKP party. Currently, the government is primarily interested in keeping the negotiation process alive, rather than hoping to gain full membership any time soon.
- Erdoğan's government will likely seek to continue the accession talks because the AKP is acutely aware of their importance for the country's domestic politics, for its economy, and – although to a lesser extent – for Turkey's international standing. The opportunity to capitalise on this process will encourage the Turkish government to avoid crises in its relations with the EU, or to at least mitigate the impact of any potential diplomatic fallout.
- Currently, the European Union does not have the power to considerably speed up reforms in Turkey. Nonetheless, in the event of a serious breach of democratic values, Brussels would be capable of delegitimising the AKP on Turkey's domestic political scene. In fact, this threat has been instrumental in keeping the authoritarian tendencies of the current government in check. The AKP is concerned that intervention by the EU could seriously jeopardise its standing on the domestic scene (despite a drop in support for EU accession, the attractiveness of the EU among the Turkish people remains considerable), and it could seriously harm Turkey's international prestige.
- The biggest threat to the future of the accession process is not so much that the AKP could turn away from Europe and the

EU, but rather that the EU and its member state could delegitimise the Turkish government. For example, this could be done by radically challenging the credibility of the AKP as a democratic political force. Such a move by Brussels could come in response to growing authoritarianism in Ankara or as a gesture to please the electorate of some EU member states which is sceptical about Turkey's accession to the EU.

- The AKP's world view amalgamates both European values such as democracy, human rights and the market economy, as well as Muslim values and the traditions of the Kemalist republic. The government does not look at Islamic traditions as a source of inspiration on how to organise the state, society and economy. In this respect, European norms and republican-Kemalist traditions are far more important. Contrary to popular opinion, the Europeanisation of Turkey is not being threatened by the country's Muslim traditions, but rather by the continued influence of Kemalist republicanism.
- Europe's drastically worsening image among the Turkish people poses a growing challenge for the future of EU-Turkish relations. The causes of this trend appear to be relatively enduring, and so there is a danger of the poor image of Europe ingraining itself among Turkish society. In the long run, this could seriously hinder political cooperation between Turkey and the EU.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Western media reports on Turkey have shown signs of a possible shift in the way Turkey perceives its relations with the European Union. The manifestations of this change include a slowdown in the implementation of reforms aligning Turkey with EU standards and the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish government. In addition there is a tendency to emphasise Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic heritage, which according to some observers from both Europe and Turkey, has been gradually isolating the country from Europe. The change in Ankara's foreign policy could well be another symptom of this shift. In recent years, the AKP government's rhetoric about the EU has been increasingly negative, and their policy towards Brussels and the individual EU member states has become ever more assertive. At the same time, Turkey's relations with the Islamic world have shown much more dynamism than its relations with Europe. Moreover, Ankara's policy towards Iran, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Libya, and recently also towards Egypt has significantly diverged from the position adopted by existing EU members and by Brussels. In this view, Turkey would join a group of the so called "swing states": rising regional powers with changing geopolitical orientations, who challenge some elements of the world order established by the West.<sup>1</sup>

This paints a picture of Turkey as a country that has abandoned the plan championed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to transform the Turkish state and society on the basis of the European model. It also shows Turkey as a country that has abandoned its plans for integration with Europe. In this view, both objectives have been replaced by a development plan based on Turkey's own path,

<sup>1</sup> More on the concept of "swing states" in: Daniel M. Kliman and Richard Fontaine, *Global Swing States Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey and the Future of International Order*, GMF, Centre for New American Security, 2012, [http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files\\_mf/1353953219CNAS\\_GlobalSwingStates\\_KlimanFontaine.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1353953219CNAS_GlobalSwingStates_KlimanFontaine.pdf)

which involves cooperation with a variety of international partners, among whom Europe no longer enjoys a privileged position. Similarly, it appears that European standards should yield to a more or less updated Ottoman legacy, or be entirely subordinated to the *ad hoc* political tactics of the ruling party – tactics which completely reject diktats from Brussels.

Such a conclusion raises obvious concerns about the future relationship between Europe and one of its most important partners, which (for now at least) continues to actively seek full membership of the European Union. It not only calls into question whether there is any point in further accession talks, but also suggests that Turkey might be turning into a geopolitical rival for the EU. Given the lack of a viable opposition force on the Turkish political scene capable of dislodging the AKP, there is little chance that current policy towards the EU will change soon.

This paper argues that these fears are grossly exaggerated. Despite visible shifts in Turkey's rhetoric, domestic and foreign policy, coupled with geopolitical changes across the region and within the European Union itself, over the next few years at least the European Union is likely to retain its position as Ankara's key partner. Meanwhile Turkey is likely to seek greater integration with the EU, and it will do its best to prevent crises in bilateral relations, or at least to mitigate their impact should such diplomatic fallouts occur.

# I. THE AKP'S ATTITUDE TO TURKEY'S EU INTEGRATION

Over the past decade, Turkey's political scene has been dominated by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has played a key role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy, obviously including its policy towards the European Union. It is likely that over the next several years the AKP will retain its dominant position in Turkey's political arena. Therefore, this paper will not analyse the views on EU integration held by other political actors, and will instead focus on the AKP.

Identifying the AKP's attitude to the European Union is a difficult task, due to the many contradictions in both the party's rhetoric and in its domestic and foreign policies. On the one hand, some of its statements and actions might suggest that Turkey sees the EU as an important international partner – perhaps even its principal one – and a key source of inspiration for its internal reforms. Other statements, however, suggest the opposite: a sense of alienation from the EU, and widespread disapproval of EU policies and of its overall socio-economic model.

## 1. The AKP's pro-European face

In all of the AKP's election manifestos (from 2002, 2007 and 2011<sup>2</sup>), its most important policy documents and in the numerous public appearances of AKP party leaders, EU membership has been defined as Turkey's strategic goal, and as an important condition of the country's political, social and economic modernisation. According to the AKP's key policy document adopted in 2012, the pro-EU orientation is to remain the party's priority for at least a decade, until 2023.<sup>3</sup> Its political commitment to European integration

<sup>2</sup> See AKP election manifestos for 2002, 2007, 2011 parliamentary elections. Available at <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr> and <http://www.akparti.org.tr>

<sup>3</sup> Source: Political vision of AK Party, 2023. Politics, Society and the World.

also manifests itself in Turkey's diplomacy. For ten years, Ankara has painstakingly tried to persuade the EU to accelerate accession negotiations. Initially these efforts were made, despite opposition from a substantial part of its electorate.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this goal, Ankara was prepared to take controversial steps, for example when the government chose to back the Annan Plan for Cyprus. It maintained its commitment to EU membership despite the EU's uncompromising position in negotiations, which both the Turkish people and the government often saw as humiliating and unjust. This subsequently raised the risk of accusations that the government was too docile in dealing with Brussels. But Ankara did not give up its EU ambitions, even when some EU member states began questioning Turkey's European status.

The AKP's dedication to the cause of Europeanisation was also visible in the scope of internal reforms undertaken by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which have without a doubt brought Turkey closer to the European model during the eleven years AKP has been in power since 2002. During this time, the army's influence on the country's political life was curbed dramatically. Considering that there had previously been no civilian control over the military, and military leaders were the dominant actors on Turkey's political scene, the changes introduced by the AKP could be described as revolutionary. The government also took measures to improve the situation of religious and ethnic minorities in the country (especially the Kurds) and improved Turkey's human rights record. Significant reforms were implemented in the judicial system and public administration. Progress was also made in most areas of the EU *acquis*

<http://www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/akparti2023siyasivizyonu-ingilizce.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> When the AKP won its first elections, support for EU membership among its electorate reached 52%, making the AKP voters one of the most Eurosceptic electorates in the 2002 elections. Ali Çarkoğlu, 'Who wants full EU membership?' in A. Çarkoğlu, B. Rubbin (eds.), *Turkey and the European Union: domestic politics, economic integration and international dynamics*, Cass, London, 2004, p. 174.

covered in accession talks, even after some negotiation chapters were blocked, including those relating to the free movement of goods, financial services and agriculture. The party leadership's declaration that Turkey would align its legislation with the standards enshrined in the *acquis communautaire* even if the country was refused EU membership could indicate that the AKP sees the European state model and European values at least as an important source of inspiration.

## 2. The AKP's anti-European face

Alongside the many arguments that might indicate that the AKP is committed to European values and to the integration process, there are also a number of reasons why this conclusion might be misleading.

They include the growing assertiveness of Ankara's policy towards the EU, and even a growing tendency to criticise the EU for the following reasons:

- the way in which it treats Turkey (blocking the accession process, tolerating the PKK's presence in the EU),
- the lack of consistency in adhering to its own values (for example, by implicitly supporting a military coup in Egypt),
- its policy towards the Islamic world (with accompanying suspicions of 'Islamophobia'<sup>5</sup>),

<sup>5</sup> The Turkish government, as well as some media and non-governmental organisations, have been actively promoting the view that there is rising Islamophobia in the West, and especially in Europe. As part of the campaign, its promoters have organised numerous conferences and seminars, and issued publications on the topic. Cases of intolerance towards Islam in Europe are reported in Turkish media very frequently. It appears that this campaign has been instrumental in convincing Turkish public opinion of the intolerance of the European people, and of the growing civilisational divide between Europe and the Islamic world.

- ineffective economic policies (which caused the recent financial crisis).

Over the past few years, the pace of implementing the reforms required for EU membership has been slowing down in Turkey.

Ankara's neglect of political relations with the EU, however, are in direct contrast to the dynamic development of its relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that began in the middle of the last decade. In addition, Ankara has established good relations with Hamas, blacklisted by the EU as a terrorist organisation. It has also maintained friendly relations with Iran and Syria (before the outbreak of the latter's civil war in 2011). More recently Ankara has offered its support to the Muslim Brotherhood, which the EU and its member states have been viewing with suspicion. Furthermore, in its foreign policy, the AKP has been increasingly drawing on Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic legacies.

On the domestic front, the AKP's third term in government has been marked by growing authoritarianism. This has been demonstrated by the civil crisis following the Gezi Park protests, as well as by restricting the press freedom.<sup>6</sup> This might suggest that Erdoğan's party has been increasingly ignoring the norms of liberal democracy promoted by the EU, and that the government's official pro-integration stance is being treated merely instrumentally and does not stem from a genuine feeling of belonging to a European community of values. To some, these suspicions are further strengthened by the political lineage of the AKP. In the 1990s, the most prominent members of the AKP leadership belonged to the Islamist movement Millî Görüş ('National View') and the Welfare Party, which formed a government between 1996 and

<sup>6</sup> The problems with press freedom in Turkey do not stem so much from direct government pressure on publishers as from the fact that most media companies in the country are owned by corporations which also operate in other areas, such as construction. These corporations bid for large state contracts, and in order to win them, they tend to apply self-censorship.

1997 under the leadership of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan tried to break the tradition of foreign policy based on an alliance with the West, which in his opinion belonged to a different civilisational sphere. Instead, he urged closer ties with the Islamic world. In 1997, Erbakan's cabinet resigned under pressure from the military, which believed that the rule of the Islamist government posed a threat to Turkey's secularism. Soon after, several members of the disbanded party, including the current president, prime minister and deputy prime minister, broke their links with their former colleagues, and in 2001 established a new party, the AKP, which supported Turkey's integration with the EU. To many observers it remains unclear whether this move was motivated by a true commitment to European values, or whether the politicians in question simply wanted to ensure that they did not share the fate of Erbakan's government.

### **3. The AKP: a European-Islamic-Kemalist mix**

Taking the above into account, it would be erroneous to see the AKP as a uniquely European force that fully shares all the values of the European Union. Such a conclusion would fail to explain Ankara's choice to act in a way that has reduced its chances of EU membership, its use of rhetoric that has worsened Turkey's political relations with Brussels and continues to undermine the EU's image in Turkish society, which reduces the likelihood of integration with the EU even further.

Nonetheless, it would be equally remiss to describe the AKP as a party which sees Islam and the accomplishments of the Ottoman Empire as its main source of inspiration. It would be wrong to argue that the AKP's support for EU integration is just a cover for the pursuit of an 'Islamic agenda' and its undemocratic means of dealing with political rivals. So far, the AKP's references to Turkey's Ottoman heritage have been superficial and rather incidental; they could be interpreted as a natural process of rediscovering a forgotten part of Turkey's history and as an attempt to create

a national narrative uniting a multi-ethnic society and creating a sense of pride among the Turkish people.

With regard to Islam, the AKP's policies have focused not on imposing the Islamic moral code on the whole society, but rather on abolishing the restrictions imposed by the Kemalist system on the religious practices of the majority of Turkey's Sunni Muslims. The attempts to impose Islamic norms on Turkish society have so far been incidental: these have included partial restrictions on the marketing of alcohol, a subsequently abandoned attempt to criminalise adultery, and a political campaign against abortion (although under public pressure the government stepped back from introducing legal restrictions on it). However, these cases do not amount to a comprehensive and consistent policy of Islamising public life. It seems that for Erdoğan's party, Muslim values should guide the spiritual lives and the moral compass of individuals rather than the public sphere. It has to be admitted though, that to some extent Islamic values have influenced Turkey's foreign policy, as manifested by Ankara's growing involvement in the affairs of the Middle East. Nonetheless, the Islamic and Ottoman traditions have not been particularly influential in the AKP's efforts to develop a new socio-political or institutional model for Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the view that Turkey's EU integration agenda has purely instrumental foundations fails to explain Ankara's relatively consistent efforts at political and economic integration with

<sup>7</sup> The influence of Islamic ideology on the AKP's domestic policies can be seen in the government's resistance to accepting the claims of the 10 million-strong Alevi minority, who are calling for the recognition of their beliefs as a separate religion and demand the same rights as those granted to Sunni Muslims. It seems that the government's position on this matter may reflect a dominant doctrine in Turkish Islam, which states that the Alevi beliefs are not a religion but heresy. However, it should be noted that in this particular case, the AKP is more guilty of failing to improve the situation of the Alevi minority rather than of introducing new, discriminatory regulations, because the current legal status of Alevism was established before the AKP came to power.

the European Union. In its implementation of the EU *acquis*, the AKP government has gone much further than would have been necessary simply to conceal its alleged 'Islamic agenda.' If there was a chance, the AKP government would most likely agree to Turkey's EU accession, in the belief that this would facilitate the political, social and economic modernisation of the country and build bridges between the West and the Islamic world. EU membership could also be reconciled with the traditional values held by Turkish society; and by strengthening democratic principles in the country, the AKP could increase the power of the conservative majority (i.e. its traditional electorate). It appears that a state model approximating – albeit not identical with – Western democracies, which guarantees religious freedom but keeps state and religion separate, is seen by the AKP as optimal for increasing the efficiency of the country and its economy, as well as being able to retain the Islamic values of the Turkish people.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, the element of AKP's identity which plays a more important role in shaping its domestic policies than Islamic tradition is its Kemalist-republican heritage. This particular tradition assigns the state a vital role in the political, social and economic spheres, and gives it a dominant influence over social values and faith matters. It allows restrictions on freedom of speech if the national interest should require it, and promotes Turkish nationalism and strict control over religious practices. According to this tradition, in public life, the authority of the country's leader or the party head, is highly valued. With the exception of direct elections, the general public are passive subjects rather

<sup>8</sup> When asked why he decided to send his daughter to study in the United States, Prime Minister Erdoğan cited America's religious freedom as the reason. Although various members of the Turkish government have repeatedly called for the separation of state and religion, the AKP has so far refused to close down the Directorate of Religious Affairs (inherited from Turkey's Kemalist era), which embodies the state's control over religious practices in the country. At the same time, it is hard to imagine a situation where the AKP would accept an inverse relationship between religion and state, in which religious leaders would have formal authority over political life.

than active actors in the political life of their country. Before the AKP took power, the integral components of the Kemalist-republican tradition in Turkey included the cult of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the dominant role of the army in political life, and the strongly emphasised secularism of the state. Regarding foreign policy, it called for the severing of ties with the Islamic world and integration with the West, which however had been regarded with suspicion.

Since coming to power, the AKP's main political goal has been to dismantle the political system based on republican and Kemalist values. The party has been largely successful in achieving these goals in relation to rooting out the cult of Atatürk, reducing the role of the army, ending the public marginalisation of Islam and putting an end to its isolation from the Muslim world. However, other aspects of this legacy, such as elements of authoritarianism, statism and nationalism, are clearly visible in the AKP government's policies.

It appears, then, that the AKP's worldview incorporates both European values, such as democracy, human rights and the market economy, as well as Muslim values, and – consciously or not – the Kemalist-republican legacy. These three components of the AKP's worldview vary in how they perceive the importance of European norms, as well as in terms of practical solutions for constructing a new social and political order in Turkey. Taken together, they add up to a rather discordant image of Europe.

It seems, however, that in the AKP's worldview the role of Islamic tradition in political and economic life should be limited. So far, it has focused on increasing the religious rights of the local Sunni Muslims and on maintaining the status of Sunni Islam above other belief systems and religions in the state's legal system. With minor exceptions, the government has refrained from imposing Islamic norms on society as a whole. This part of its heritage has played a certain role in guiding Ankara's policy towards the

Middle East. But overall the AKP's Islamic roots have had little impact on the party's policy towards the EU.

It seems that the architecture of Turkey's socio-political system has been far more influenced by the competing European and Kemalist-republican traditions. Although the latter does not oppose Turkey's integration with the EU, in practice, however, it does distance Turkey from Europe because of the way in which this tradition has been shaping the country's domestic policy, e.g. by legitimising authoritarianism and statism.

## **II. THE INSTRUMENTALISM OF ANKARA'S RELATIONS WITH THE EU**

Although the AKP's worldview orientation plays a significant role in shaping its policies, the party's political calculations aimed at consolidating power appear even more important. These calculations are conditioned primarily by the current situation in domestic politics, in the economy and in the international arena. The Turkish government is well aware that the chances of breaking the current stalemate in the accession negotiations are minimal. After all, individual EU members remain opposed to Ankara's EU ambitions, and real progress on the Cyprus issue seems unlikely. However, although the prospect of imminent EU membership is currently absent, the negotiations themselves are not completely pointless. For now at least, the real objective of the talks is not to finalise them, but to keep the very process of negotiations alive. The process itself is being used by the Turkish government for political ends. It is likely that the future position of Prime Minister Erdoğan's government with regard to Turkey's accession negotiations will depend less on its ideological preferences or the likelihood of quick accession to the EU, and more on the role the process will play for the AKP's position on Turkey's domestic political scene, the country's economic situation, and for its place on the international stage.

### **1. Europe as an instrument of political struggle**

Since taking power, the AKP government has taken advantage of EU support to both implement reforms dismantling the existing architecture of the Turkish state and to stave off attacks from its political rivals. From the very beginning, Erdoğan's party has been suspected by the opposition, the army, and by large segments of public opinion of seeking to replace the Kemalist system with a system based on Islam, and of intending to reorient Turkey's foreign policy away from the West and towards the Muslim world. The AKP hoped that by supporting Turkey's integration with the

European Union and by launching reforms aimed at aligning Turkey with the European model, it would be able to refute these allegations. The EU's favourable reaction to Ankara's pro-European orientation increased the AKP's credibility among the Turkish people. Over subsequent years, the acceptance the AKP received from European states and from the EU has played an important part in legitimising the party on the Turkish political scene, and in consolidating and expanding its electorate.

Domestically, the AKP's pro-EU policy has been most effective in reducing the role of the army in Turkish politics. Europe's support for Ankara has lowered the risk of another military coup, since the army realised that such a move would result in the country's isolation on the international stage. Similarly, due to high levels of public support for Turkey's EU membership in the first half of the previous decade, any attempts to remove the AKP from power would have met with considerable public resistance, not only from the AKP's electorate but also from the liberals and the left, who see EU accession as a priority. Europe's support proved crucial during successive battles fought by the Erdoğan camp against the army and the Kemalist establishment for primacy on Turkey's political scene: first, when it tried to reduce the role of the army-dominated National Security Council<sup>9</sup>, then when it sought Abdullah Gül's presidential nomination in 2007<sup>10</sup>, when the Constitutional Court tried to ban the party in 2008<sup>11</sup>, as well as when

<sup>9</sup> The National Security Council was a constitutional body controlled and dominated by the army, which held formal and effective powers to override the decisions of the state's civil institutions. The NSC guaranteed the primacy of the military in the country's political life. Its powers were drastically reduced by the AKP through a series of reforms preparing Turkey for EU membership, including a 2011 referendum on constitutional amendments.

<sup>10</sup> For five months in 2007, the Kemalist establishment, particularly the army, blocked Abdullah Gül's presidential nomination (at the time, Turkish presidents were elected by parliament). The opposition to his nomination reflected a real fear that his election would threaten the secular character of the state. The standoff led to a serious political crisis in the country.

<sup>11</sup> In 2008, the prosecutor's office filed a motion with the Constitutional Court to close down the AKP and implement a 5-year ban on holding public office

the AKP thwarted the Ergenekon group's alleged attempt to stage a *coup d'état*<sup>12</sup>, and finally, during the introduction of amendments to the constitution in 2011.

The AKP's objective of aligning Turkey with EU standards was helpful not only in its struggle to curb army influence, but also in implementing reforms which otherwise would have encountered strong opposition from interest groups and from the public. One example of this was the reform of the judiciary, which allowed the AKP to remove the party's most ardent opponents from some of the most senior positions in the country's courts, the Constitutional Court, and the prosecutor's office. By citing political pressure from Brussels, the government was able to carry out reforms which increased the rights of religious and ethnic minorities (especially the Kurds, whose votes the AKP was trying to win). Importantly, the need to comply with EU standards made it possible for the government to lift a ban on women's headscarves in public institutions. More recently, the AKP cited the example of the Nordic countries and imposed restrictions on the sale of alcohol.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, EU candidate status increases Turkey's bargaining power in negotiations on a series of important issues, such as the abolition of Schengen visas, better conditions for Turkish companies operating in the EU, and the inclusion of Turkish students in EU scholarship programmes, amongst others. Brussels' financial support for the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* in Turkey is another significant incentive. Turkey is the largest

for 71 AKP members, including the prime minister and the president. The motion was ultimately rejected (by just one vote). This was the second motion to close the AKP down, following a similar attempt in 2002. In both cases, the EU urged the court not to close the party down.

<sup>12</sup> Ergenekon is an alleged secret organisation set up by high-ranking army officers, politicians and members of academia and the media, which attempted to destabilise the country and pave the way for a military coup after the AKP took power in 2002.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, alcoholism rates in Turkey are much lower than in the Nordic countries.

beneficiary of EU funds among the EU candidate countries (Ankara is to receive nearly €1 billion in 2013 alone).

However, it appears that domestically the significance of EU integration as a political instrument has been waning since the end of the last decade. This has been caused by a number of factors. The blocking of the integration process by Cyprus and a drop in support for Turkey's membership inside the European Union have weakened the credibility of the AKP's claims that its political decisions must continue to reflect the objective of EU accession. Flagging support for integration with the EU among the Turkish public has had a similar effect. The AKP's victory in its power struggle against the army and its continued lead over the opposition have given the Turkish government more leeway in domestic politics, and made it less reliant on support from Europe. Among the manifestations of Europe's dwindling significance in Turkish politics has been the AKP's decision not to seek the EU's backing during the peace talks with the Kurds which the government resumed at the end of 2012. Other manifestations include the intensification of authoritarianism within the government and a slow-down in the implementation of reforms aligning Turkey with EU standards, which has exposed Ankara to criticism from Brussels and individual EU member states.

Nonetheless, claiming that the EU no longer matters for the AKP's position on the Turkish political scene would be an exaggeration. This became apparent, for example, during the political crisis which followed a brutal police crackdown on a series of protests in the country in June 2013.<sup>14</sup> The EU condemned the AKP's response to the protests and threatened to change its earlier decision to resume accession talks with Turkey. This raised serious concerns among Erdoğan's ministers about the public reaction to a possible

<sup>14</sup> In May and June 2013, Turkey saw a series of large-scale protests against the authoritarianism of the AKP government. The protests started when the police violently broke up a demonstration against the closure of Istanbul's Gezi Park.

crisis between Ankara and Brussels. Eventually, as a result of Ankara's diplomatic efforts, the negotiations were formally resumed (although in fact the talks were postponed until a later date).<sup>15</sup> The protests and their aftermath have shown that a significant part of the population is strongly opposed to any attempts by the government to abandon democratic standards, and that Europe is still able to seriously threaten the position of the AKP by undermining its credibility as a democratic force.

From the point of view of the Turkish government, therefore, at present the EU's support is desirable but not necessary to achieve its domestic policy objectives. In those instances where short-term political interests appear to be more important, Erdoğan's government is increasingly willing to act on them, even at the risk of opening itself up to criticism from Brussels. Nonetheless, AKP politicians realise that although the benefits of the current EU integration policy are limited, abandoning the negotiations could prove very costly indeed, offering little in return. This will likely encourage the AKP to continue the process of integration with the EU.

## **2. Economic cooperation with the EU as a source of economic growth**

The Turkish economy is heavily dependent on cooperation with the European Union, while the conditions and extent of this cooperation is closely linked to the status of Turkey's accession talks. Therefore, political relations with Brussels are important for the AKP as an instrument of economic policy.

Under the AKP government, the economic ties between Turkey and the European Union have strengthened significantly,

<sup>15</sup> Szymon Ananicz and Kamil Frymark, EU-Turkey: A new negotiation chapter will open conditionally, *Eastweek*, OSW, 26 June 2013, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2013-06-26/euturkey-a-new-negotiation-chapter-will-open-conditionally>

as evidenced by the almost threefold increase in bilateral trade. The EU remains a major market for Turkish exporters. Although Turkey's exports to the EU have declined in recent years in percentage terms, their volume has nearly tripled from \$20 billion in 2002 to almost \$60 billion in 2012 in absolute terms.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that Europe is currently the main, and almost the only export market for Turkish medium- and high-technology products. These goods account for nearly 40% of Turkish exports to the EU, and their sale has a much greater impact on the state of the Turkish economy than the exports of low-tech products that dominate Turkey's trade with other countries.<sup>17</sup> This is an important factor stimulating innovation and enhancing the competitiveness of the Turkish economy, especially since the global trade in low-tech products has become highly competitive.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the European Union as a trading partner for Ankara has been stressed in government forecasts, which suggest that the EU will remain the most significant market for Turkish exports for at least another decade.<sup>19</sup> This opinion is shared by the influential Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM).<sup>20</sup> This explains the government's determination to participate in the negotiations on the proposed EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Ankara has expressed a strong interest in joining

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ekonomi.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=7145D543-D8D3-8566-4520-DFB6CC4A86BA>

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Gros and Can Selçuki. The Changing Structure of Turkey's Trade and Industrial Competitiveness: Implications for the EU, CEPS Working Paper 03, 2013, [http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE\\_WP\\_03.pdf](http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_WP_03.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Küresel Ticarete Türkiye'nin Yeniden Konumlandırılması Dis Ticarete yeni rotalar, 2011, Ministry of the Economy of the Republic of Turkey, pp. 27-28. <http://ekonomi.gov.tr/upload/98C9FBB8-D8D3-8566-45209FC758B-662CB/dtyr.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> TIM is an association of Turkish exporters. It has an important influence on the Turkish government's export policy. TIM played an important role in the development of the government's export strategy until 2023. <http://www.tim.org.tr/files/downloads/2023/tim%202023%20ihracat%20stratejisi%20raporu.pdf>, p. 327.

the TTIP. A recent statement by Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan has suggested that remaining outside the TIPP could cost his country \$20 billion a year, and was a clear indication that Ankara sees this possibility as a serious threat.<sup>21</sup>

For a number of years, the share of EU capital in foreign direct investment in Turkey has remained above 70%.<sup>22</sup> A substantial part of the investment is allocated to the construction of modern manufacturing plants and service providers, and is seen as an important source of Turkey's technological modernisation. According to the Turkish Ministry for European Integration, as much as 85% of the capital invested in the country in advanced technologies comes from the European Union.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey is closely linked with the European economic system through a number of institutions. Formally, the main structure linking the two economies is the EU-Turkey Customs Union, which covers trade in industrial products. It gives Turkey access to one of the largest markets for industrial goods, where it is protected from external competition in the same way as EU operators are. The Turkish government's fiscal policy is guided by the EU's Maastricht criteria, which demonstrates Ankara's intention to continue its affiliation with the European economic system. The criteria have been developed for countries applying for euro zone membership, which means that Turkey does not have to follow them. It continues to do so, however, because it is convinced that adhering to the criteria facilitates the stability and growth of the Turkish economy, which in turn increases the country's attractiveness to European investors. The importance of economic

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-310557-turkey-may-seek-revisions-to-customs-union-over-eu-us-deal.html>

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.invest.gov.tr/en-US/investmentguide/investorsguide/pages/FDIinTurkey.aspx>

<sup>23</sup> Ministry for EU Affairs, Progress Report prepared by Turkey, 2012, [http://www.abgs.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2012/2012\\_tr\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.abgs.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2012/2012_tr_progress_report_en.pdf)

cooperation with Europe is also visible in the AKP's fairly consistent implementation of the sections of the *acquis* relating to economic matters – even though it often neglects other areas of the legislation.<sup>24</sup>

Over the past few years Turkey has sought to reduce its economic dependence on the West and has tried to acquire a more active role in its economic relations with the EU. With that objective in mind, Ankara has taken measures to increase its trade volumes with other regions. Consequently, between 2002 and 2012, Turkish exports to the EU fell from 56% to 38%, while Turkish exports to the Middle East rose from 9% to 27%.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in 2012 the government increased opportunities for Islamic banking (which entered the market in 1983), which could indicate Ankara's desire to diversify its sources of capital and an attempt to reduce its reliance on Europe in this area.

Erdoğan's government has also been seeking to strengthen its position in economic relations with the EU, as evidence by a shift in Turkey's energy policy. By withdrawing (together with Azerbaijan) from the Nabucco project proposed by the EU, Turkey has effectively 'hijacked' the EU's concept of an alternative gas supply route, known as the Southern Corridor. Ankara hopes that the proposed gas pipeline (TANAP) will allow it to further its own geopolitical agenda, rather than letting it serve the energy interests of the European Union, as Brussels had envisaged.<sup>26</sup> A further symptom of Ankara's growing assertiveness in its relations with

<sup>24</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/strategy-and-progress-report/>

<sup>25</sup> These changes were largely the result of the financial crisis in the EU and the temporary loss of European markets; partly, however, they were also the outcome of a conscious policy to promote trade relations and investment in the MENA region.

<sup>26</sup> Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Southern Gas Corridor managed by Azerbaijan and Turkey, OSW Commentary, 18/07/2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2012-07-18/southern-gas-corridor-managed-azerbaijan-and-turkey>

the EU has been the Turkish government's increasingly frequent objections to how the Customs Union is run.<sup>27</sup>

However, it should be noted that Turkey's trade relations with countries across the Middle East and North Africa depend largely on the current political climate, as illustrated by a surge in gold exports to Iran in 2012, which translated into an increase of about 7% in Turkish exports to the Middle East that year.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, according to the an analysis by the Turkish Ministry of Economy, the potential for exports to Ankara's key trading partners in the Middle East (especially Iraq) has nearly been reached, which suggests that Turkey is expecting a slowdown in the rate at which its trade with the region could grow in the coming years.<sup>29</sup> In addition, a significant deterioration of Turkey's political relations with most Middle Eastern countries between 2012 and 2013<sup>30</sup>, and

<sup>27</sup> Ankara has been increasingly irritated by the EU's tendency to ignore Turkey's demands in the negotiation of trade agreements with third countries. Under the EU-Turkey Customs Union agreement, Ankara must comply with the provisions of any trade agreements concluded by the EU with third countries, even though in practice the government in Ankara is not consulted during the negotiations. Turkey has also been critical of the continued exclusion of Turkish nationals from the EU labour market. This, according to the Turkish government, puts Turkish businesses operating in the EU under the Customs Union agreement in a worse position than their European competitors. Turkey has also criticised the EU for imposing visa restrictions and transport quotas on Turkish nationals, and for launching anti-dumping investigations on trumped-up charges, which in practice harm the position of Turkish companies operating in the EU. See the following article, which was published by a former Turkish Customs and Trade Minister: <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/2012-1-HayatiYazici.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> The unprecedented volume of gold exports to Iran in 2012 was in fact a form of payment for Iranian crude oil. However, since the bill was settled with gold rather than in dollars (following the introduction of US sanctions against Iran), the Turkish trade statistics showed the transaction under 'exports'. This may have given the false impression of a rapid reorientation of Turkey's foreign trade from the West to the East.

<sup>29</sup> See Türkiye'nin Yeniden Konumlandırılması, <http://ekonomi.gov.tr/upload/98C9FBB8-D8D3-8566-45209FC758B662CB/dtyr.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> This reflects the rapid deterioration in relations between Ankara and a number of Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, which unlike Turkey refused to condemn the military coup in Egypt in July 2013.

the growing political instability in those countries will further complicate economic relations with the region.<sup>31</sup>

It is therefore highly likely that the European Union will remain Turkey's most important trading partner, and at least in the immediate future, no other region will be able to replace the EU as Ankara's main foreign investor or its biggest export market. The fact that the government is well aware of the EU's importance for Turkey is apparent not only in its economic analyses and political speeches, but also in the measures it has taken to further increase Turkey's institutional integration with the European market and with the EU economic system.

Turkey's position in trade with the European Union and its ability to attract investment from the EU will, to a large extent, depend on the quality of Ankara's political relations with Brussels.<sup>32</sup> Turkey's EU membership negotiations are regarded by foreign investors as a guarantee of the predictability and stability of its economy. Any political crisis between Ankara and Brussels would inevitably reduce confidence levels among foreign companies interested in investing in Turkey, which would lead to a significant outflow of capital from the Turkish market. Maintaining the existing institutional channels of dialogue between Ankara and Brussels, as well as sustaining good political relations with the EU and its member states, will be instrumental for Turkey to secure its national interests with regard to trade within the Customs

<sup>31</sup> For example, after Ankara (unlike most Arab states) condemned the military coup in Egypt in July 2013, the United Arab Emirates cancelled its \$12 billion investment in a Turkish power station. In addition, the new government in Cairo introduced restrictions on Turkish companies operating in Egypt, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/uae-firm-may-exit-12-billion-energy-project-in-turkey-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=53239>

<sup>32</sup> According to the Turkish Ministry for EU Affairs, "the continuity of economic benefit is ensured by Turkey's commitment to the EU process as a candidate country and the environment of stability and opportunities brought by this process". See Progress Report prepared by Turkey, 2012. [http://www.abgs.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2012/2012\\_tr\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.abgs.gov.tr/files/IlerlemeRaporlari/2012/2012_tr_progress_report_en.pdf)

Union and in relation to the emerging TTIP. Furthermore, to improve the effectiveness of the Turkish businesses operating in the European market, the government will, for example, need to campaign for the abolition of Schengen visas for Turkish citizens, which could prove difficult if Ankara were to loosen its ties with the EU. Therefore, economic cooperation with Europe will remain an important instrument of the AKP government's economic policy, and it will play a significant role in motivating Ankara not to abandon its policy of integration with the European Union.

### **3. Europe as a partner on the international stage**

The European Union and its member states are useful partners for Ankara on the international stage, even though Turkey sees them as less significant than the United States. From Ankara's point of view, cooperation with the EU is important because of the major actors in the region, only Europe values Turkey's stability and welcomes its regional ambitions. Whereas Ankara sees other actors as rivals or a potential threat (Russia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria), Europe appears to be the only region that does not pose a serious threat to its national security. The EU member states and Turkey have taken similar stances on most international issues regarding the Balkans, the Middle East, Russia and the Caucasus, as evidenced by the fact that Turkey has so far accepted most positions worked out jointly by EU members under the Common Foreign and Security Policy.<sup>33</sup> Although the official convergence of positions rarely translate into concrete cooperation, it does limit the scope for rivalry and conflict.

The alliance with Europe helps in other ways, too. For example, Berlin's official support for Ankara's policy towards Syria has

<sup>33</sup> See the European Commission's Strategy and Progress Report. In recent years, Turkey shared up to 50-60% of the common positions negotiated by the EU member states on matters of foreign policy with regard to the initiatives which Ankara has been invited to by the EU. <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/strategy-and-progress-report/>

increased its legitimacy, and also partly shielded Turkey against a likely pressure from Russia, which supports President Bashar al-Assad's regime.<sup>34</sup> Turkey has also repeatedly received political support from the EU.<sup>35</sup> The bilateral cooperation between Turkey and European states on the Syrian conflict, and the actions taken by Brussels have shown that in crisis situations alliance with Europe widens Ankara's room for manoeuvre on the international stage. It cannot be ruled out that if the US were to continue reducing its presence in the Middle East, European countries would gradually become even more important for Turkey on regional security matters.

Ankara's cooperation with the EU and its member states has been also instrumental in boosting Turkey's international prestige. Negotiations for EU membership serve as a confirmation of the country's progress in adopting democratic principles and of its significant economic power. Ankara's ties with Europe are an advantage in its relations with the Middle East. Opinion polls conducted in the region show that close ties with the EU have a positive impact on Turkey's image across the Arab world.<sup>36</sup> Closer integration with the EU is also important for Ankara's relations with the United States, which Turkey sees as one of its main partners on security

<sup>34</sup> Germany has openly supported Turkey's policy towards Syria. For example, Berlin backed Ankara during its short-term diplomatic crisis with Moscow in October 2012, after Turkey forced a Russian plane to land on suspicion that it was carrying weapons for the Syrian regime. See Szymon Ananicz and Witold Rodkiewicz, Turkish-Russian tension of the Syrian crisis, East-week, OSW, 17 October 2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/east-week/2012-10-17/turkishrussian-tension-over-syrian-crisis>

<sup>35</sup> EU High Representative Catherine Ashton condemned the shelling of Turkish village carried out from Syrian territory. The Council of Europe also condemned Syria for shooting down a Turkish plane in June 2012. [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132709.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132709.pdf), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/25/eu-condemns-syria-turkish-jet>

<sup>36</sup> Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East, TESEV 2011, p. 22. [http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/8df416b2-6026-4af7-bbc9-ba90954e7b3b/Perception%20of%20Turkey%202011\\_IIBASIM.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/8df416b2-6026-4af7-bbc9-ba90954e7b3b/Perception%20of%20Turkey%202011_IIBASIM.pdf)

issues in the Middle East and the Black Sea region. Washington has traditionally favoured Turkey's membership of the EU in the belief that this would consolidate Turkish democracy and increase the predictability of its key ally in that part of the world.

Nonetheless, one should not overestimate the significance of the cooperation on international affairs for other aspects of EU-Turkey relations. Turkey's cooperation with individual EU members in addressing the Middle East crisis did not stem from, and had little to do, with the accession process itself, and could be continued even if accession talks break off. The link between membership talks and diplomatic cooperation has been more pronounced in Ankara's cooperation with the EU as an organisation, but Brussels' influence on the balance of power in the region remains rather small, which the Turkish government is well aware of.

Ankara's increasingly assertive foreign policy, its efforts to acquire a more prominent role on the international stage – and above all, the increasingly frequent divergence of opinions between Turkey and Europe on issues such as the Iranian nuclear programme, Israel, Palestine (Hamas), NATO's intervention in Libya (in the planning phase<sup>37</sup>) and the military coup in Egypt – might indicate that the AKP is paying less and less attention to diplomatic and security cooperation with the EU. The policy of integration with the EU is of little use when it comes to shoring up Turkey's international standing. The significance of this policy lies mainly in its capacity for raising Turkey's prestige as a modern and democratic state. Although Ankara's cooperation with individual EU member states and Brussels on international matters has usually proved useful in times of crises, it has not been dependent on Turkey's EU accession process. This cooperation could therefore be continued within the framework of NATO or on a bilateral basis, even if the membership negotiations were to be abandoned.

<sup>37</sup> Turkey initially opposed the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya.

### III. THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF TURKEY'S INTEGRATION WITH THE EU

The AKP has abandoned the previous governments' monopoly on formulating foreign policy objectives, and instead has been trying to ensure that Turkey's diplomacy reflects public expectations to a greater extent. Therefore, foreign policy should avoid conflicts with Turkish public opinion, and, if possible, should be used as a vehicle for mobilising the electorate. This is why any prediction of Ankara's future policy towards the EU must take the way Europe is perceived by the Turkish public into account.

Europe's image among the Turkish people has always been rather ambiguous. On the one hand, attitudes towards Europe have been influenced by distrust dating back at least to World War I, when Western powers attempted to divide Turkey into their own spheres of influence. This feeling (commonly known as the 'Sèvres syndrome'<sup>38</sup>) remains particularly strong because the victory against the European invaders subsequently led to the founding of the new Turkish Republic. Over the years, the education system and official propaganda have turned the memory of those events into an important component of Turkish national identity. Currently, distrust of the West is being fuelled by certain actions of European countries that, according to Turkish public opinion, are aimed at weakening Turkey: for example, allowing the PKK to operate in European countries. This perception is also strengthened by Europe's continued reluctance to allow Turkey into the EU.

On the other hand, Europe is seen as an attractive model of political, social and economic organisation. This view dates back to nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, which after a series of defeats on the international stage carried out a series of reforms

<sup>38</sup> In 1920, the Entente Powers forced the Ottoman Empire to sign a peace treaty, which stripped it of much of its territory and aimed to turn it into a vassal state.

modelled on European powers. Europe's favourable image has also been reinforced by Turkey's Cold War alliance with NATO. Moreover, the positive accounts of Europe produced by Turkish emigrants; and the entertainment industry, which portrays Western Europe in a good light, have also contributed to the positive image of Europe among Turkish society. The vision of an economically developed Europe was in stark contrast to Turkey's underdeveloped economy and anachronistic political system, which was widely regarded as unfair and inefficient.

Consequently, Europe's image in Turkish society changes depending on which component of this dichotomous vision prevails at any given time. Low levels of knowledge about Europe and the EU among Turks result in frequent and significant shifts in attitude towards the European Union (a study by Hakan Yılmaz at the University of the Bosphorus suggests that only 11% of Turks have visited Europe).<sup>39</sup> Over the past decade, Turks' image of the EU and of the Europeans has worsened dramatically. Whereas 65% of the population had a positive view of Europeans in 2003, this figure had dropped to just 48% by 2012; meanwhile, the number of people reporting a negative view of Europeans rose during the same period from 26% to 42%. Fewer Turks also believe that Europeans respect the rights of others, or that they are well organised. These opinion polls show that Europe is losing its image as an economic and political model that Turkey might be interested in adopting. At the same time, there has been a growing sense of distance between Turkey and Europe. Between 2003 and 2012, fewer people felt that Turkey and Europe were part of the same community geographically (from 70% to 46%), historically (from 61% to 33%) and culturally (from 28% to 21%). However, a sense of being part of the same economic community increased in the same period from

<sup>39</sup> Hakan Yılmaz (ed.), *Türkiye'de Avrupa - Şüphesizliği Karşılaştırmalı Bulgular, 2003-2012*, [http://hakanYilmaz.info/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/OSI-2012-Euroskop-2003-2012-Karsilastirmalar-Sunus-v04.344184250.pdf](http://hakanYilmaz.info/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/OSI-2012-Euroskop-2003-2012-Karsilastirmalar-Sunus-v04.344184250.pdf)

28% to 37%.<sup>40</sup> The increasingly poor image of Europe in Turkish society has led to a drop in support for EU membership. Whereas in 2004 almost 74% of the Turkish people were in favour of EU accession, currently the figure stands at just 44%.<sup>41</sup>

## 1. The cause of Europe's image problem

Europe's image in Turkey has suffered for a number of reasons. First, the EU's policy towards Turkey is seen as unfair and humiliating. The public perception is that the EU has failed to deliver on its earlier promises by not only refusing to allow Turkey into the European Union, but also by maintaining an embargo on trade with Northern Cyprus and by rejecting calls for the abolition of Schengen visas for Turkish citizens.<sup>42</sup> Europe's image has also suffered as a result of the financial crisis, which has raised questions about the effectiveness of the European economic and political model. The image of Europe in crisis contrasts with the rapid economic growth witnessed in Turkey, and promotes the belief that Turkey does not need integration with Europe to achieve development and modernisation. In addition, there is a widespread view in Turkey that Europeans have a hostile attitude towards Islam, which is perpetuated by (very meticulous, although at times exaggerated) Turkish media reports of cases of intolerance against Muslim immigrants in the EU (in 2012, 65% of respondents believed that Europeans were xenophobic).<sup>43</sup> As a result, there is a growing perception in Turkish society of a division between the Islamic world and the West, which is

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> See <http://trends.gmfus.org/>

<sup>42</sup> See Szymon Ananicz, Cyprus presidency and Turkey's relations with the European Union, OSW Commentary, 26 June 2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2012-06-26/cyprus-presidency-and-turkeys-relations-european-union>

<sup>43</sup> Hakan Yılmaz, Türkiye'de Avrupa - Şüphesizliği Karşılaştırmalı Bulgular, 2003-2012, [http://hakanYilmaz.info/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/OSI-2012-Euroskep-2003-2012-Karsilastirmalar-Sunus-v04.344184250.pdf](http://hakanYilmaz.info/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/OSI-2012-Euroskep-2003-2012-Karsilastirmalar-Sunus-v04.344184250.pdf)

particularly significant for a society that attaches great importance to religion. It also seems that the currently low opinion of the European Union among Turks is partly a result of the negative rhetoric of the Turkish government, who have been increasingly portraying the EU in a bad light to abdicate themselves of any responsibility for the lack of progress in the accession negotiations. Poor knowledge of Europe, combined with high levels of public confidence in the government, means that negative opinions expressed publicly for political reasons tend to seep into the consciousness of a significant part of the population.

The relatively negative perception of Europe in Turkey is not a new phenomenon. In the late 1990s, anti-European sentiment was also quite strong, after which Europe's image improved rapidly in the first half of the last decade, only to suffer another setback in recent years.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that Turkish attitudes to Europe are easily influenced by the immediate political and economic context. Nonetheless, it appears that the factors responsible for the negative vision of Europe in recent years could be relatively durable. After all, there are currently no prospects for any real progress in Turkey's EU accession negotiations, or for a resolution of the Cyprus conflict, the rehabilitation of the image of Europeans as tolerant people, or for a quick end to the financial crisis. This raises concerns that the negative image of Europe could take deep root in Turkish public opinion.

<sup>44</sup> For example, in 1995 only 56% of Turks were in favour of EU membership – that is, the figure was almost 20 percentage points lower than a decade later. Ali Çarkoğlu, 'Who wants full EU membership?' in A. Çarkoğlu, B. Rubbin (eds.), *Turkey and the European Union: domestic politics, economic integration and international dynamics*, Cass, London, 2004, p. 173.

## 2. A rise in conservatism as a factor distancing Turkey from Europe?

While it seems that the above-mentioned factors have indeed had a significant impact on the poor image of Europe in Turkey in recent years, it would be much harder to defend the widespread opinion that the shift in public perception of the West has been caused by Turkey's escalating conservatism. First, it would be difficult to find evidence for the alleged rise in conservatism. Although increasing numbers of Turks have declared an adherence to Islam, an opinion poll carried out by the University of the Bosphorus suggests that the percentage of people holding conservative views on moral and political issues decreased slightly between 2006 and 2012.<sup>45</sup> The survey also points to a small drop in religious practice in Turkish society. These conclusions seem to confirm the findings of other studies: a TESEV survey suggests that most Turks regard their parents' generation as more religious<sup>46</sup>, while a Bahçeşehir University opinion poll indicates that declarations of adherence to Islam increase with the age of the respondent.<sup>47</sup> This challenges the argument that Turks are becoming more conservative, especially as far as the younger generations are concerned. The studies also suggest that Turkish society is becoming more tolerant, and increasingly committed to political and religious pluralism, as well as to other values commonly associated with Europe – although it should be noted that over the past six years, these changes have been rather small.

<sup>45</sup> Hakan Yılmaz, *Türkiye'de Muhafazakarlık: Aile, Cinsellik, Din*, Bosphorus University, Open Society Institute, 2012, <http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/muhafazakarlik/04.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Ali Çarkoğlu, *Binnaz Toprak, Değişen Türkiye'de Din, Toplum Ve Siyaset*, TESEV 2006, p. 40, [http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/aoc7d243-50ec-4877-9791-57d4b5bfd356/Degisen%20Turkiyede%20Din%20Toplum%20Siyaset%2011\\_2006.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/aoc7d243-50ec-4877-9791-57d4b5bfd356/Degisen%20Turkiyede%20Din%20Toplum%20Siyaset%2011_2006.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Yılmaz Esmer (ed.), *Türkiye Değerler Atlası 2012*, Bahçeşehir University, 2012, [http://www.bahcesehir.edu.tr/haber/turkiye\\_degerler\\_atlasi\\_2012\\_yayinlandi](http://www.bahcesehir.edu.tr/haber/turkiye_degerler_atlasi_2012_yayinlandi).

Under the AKP, there has been a rapid socio-economic advancement of the poorer and more conservative segments of Turkish society. In the last decade, many members of this group migrated from the provinces to the cities and took prominent positions in public administration, the media and business, thus creating the impression of the spread of conservatism and Islamic values in society. The greater visibility of Islam in public has also been affected by the partial lifting of a ban on women's headscarves and the removal of other restrictions that previously limited the freedom of religious practice and public demonstration of adherence to Islam (for example, fewer restrictions on the running of *madrasas*). However, the studies cited earlier suggest that more frequent displays of conservative attitudes and religious faith in public (for example, through dress) do not mean that the conservative segments of the population have increased in number.<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, the available opinion polls call into question the idea that conservatism is a factor distancing Ankara from Europe. Traditionally, Turkey's integration with Europe has been supported by liberal and left-wing academics, media professionals, Westernised intellectuals and artists.<sup>49</sup> Equally strong support for integration has come also from the business community, which benefits from economic cooperation between the EU and Turkey.<sup>50</sup> However, EU aspirations have also been voiced by other social groups. According to EDAM, the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies,

<sup>48</sup> Turkish critics of the AKP government have also pointed out the increasingly widespread attempts by the conservative segments of society to put pressure on individuals who do not display their commitment to Islam, such as urging women to wear headscarves. Another recent development which is often mentioned in this context is a positive bias in the workplace, including public offices, towards individuals holding conservative views.

<sup>49</sup> For example, an EDAM survey has suggested that over 86% of the foreign policy experts are in favour of Turkey's EU membership (the survey was carried on a sample of 202 experts). *Türkiye'de ve Dis Politika Kamuoyu Anketleri 2013/1*, <http://edam.org.tr/document/EDAMAnketOcak2013.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Turkey's influential business associations (especially TUSIAD and TOBB) have been actively promoting Turkey's integration with the EU, and have lobbied Brussels to that end.

the highest support for the continuation of negotiations is among conservative BDP voters (88%<sup>51</sup>), despite this being the most conservative electorate. This confirms the results of an opinion poll conducted by TESEV, which suggest that support for integration with the EU is the strongest in Turkey's conservative eastern and south-eastern regions.<sup>52</sup> The second most pro-EU electorate is the conservative AKP electorate. Support for EU membership among AKP voters is above the national average. Turkey's EU integration has also been actively promoted by the highly influential spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen and his movement, through popular media and education activities, among other means.<sup>53</sup> This therefore puts the suggestion of an inverse relation between conservatism and support for the EU in doubt.

It should be noted, however, that the support for EU accession among Turkey's conservative circles – for example, among the Kurds and within Fethullah Gülen's movement – is motivated largely by the hope that European integration would lead to the final dismantling of the Kemalist system that these segments of society perceive as a threat. It therefore follows that their support for EU integration does not necessarily indicate the pursuit of EU-style liberal democratic principles. It is likely that over time the pro-EU orientation of these groups will gradually diminish because the main restrictions imposed on religious life by the Kemalist system will have already been abolished by the AKP

<sup>51</sup> The BDP is interested in representing the interests of the Kurdish minority. Such strong support for EU integration among the BDP electorate might reflect the Kurds' belief that EU membership would force Ankara to grant them political and cultural rights and would protect them against Turkish nationalism. Türkiye'de Ve Dis Politika Kamuoyu Anketleri 2013/1, <http://edam.org.tr/document/EDAMAnketOcak2013.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Mensur Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, Aybars Görgülü, Erdem Aydın, Foreign Policy Perceptions in Turkey, TESEV, 2011, [http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/d40ab847-5676-4864-8f99-37fcb58ffc34/Foreign%20Policy%20Perceptions%20in%20Turkey\\_05.2011.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/d40ab847-5676-4864-8f99-37fcb58ffc34/Foreign%20Policy%20Perceptions%20in%20Turkey_05.2011.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> See <http://tr.fgulen.com/content/view/8256/12/>. The fact remains that the tactics used by this movement have not adhered to democratic principles.

government. As a result, the EU's role as a guardian of civil liberties might no longer be so important. The same will apply to the Kurdish minority: as the Kurds receive more rights and the eastern parts of Turkey are demilitarised, the significance of the EU will be weakened. The pace of deterioration of the EU's image is likely to pick up as Turkish public opinion becomes convinced of Europe's bias against Islam.

## **SUMMARY**

### **THE PERCEPTION OF EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF TURKEY'S EUROPEAN POLICY**

It is not clear whether the government in Ankara still believes that Turkey's EU accession is a real possibility. It appears, however, that the benefits of continuing the process of European integration will urge the AKP not to abandon the negotiations. The government will try to avoid potential crises in bilateral relations, and should such crises occur, to mitigate their outcome. Erdogan's government sees the process of integration with the EU as a useful tool for achieving economic goals, both in domestic politics and on the international stage.

It seems that this approach could be especially important for Turkey's economy. The AKP sees Europe as its key and most promising economic partner, which will play a crucial role in the country's development, and in turn strengthen its position on the political and international stage. The relatively strong relationship between the intensity of this cooperation and the status of the integration process will highlight the benefit of continuing the negotiations.

The role of the integration process for the AKP's position in domestic politics has changed in recent years. The role of the process as an instrument in political competition or as a pretext for reforms has weakened. At the same time, however, the government is aware that abandoning the integration talks would undermine its position on the political scene. Erdoğan's government is likely to try to reduce this risk by diminishing the role of the European Union as a tutor of Turkey's democratisation. First and foremost, however, the government will try to reduce the likelihood of such a crisis. Any criticism directed at the European Union should be considered as, on the one hand, an expression of exasperation with its policy towards Turkey, and on the other, as a way for Ankara to abdicate responsibility for the lack of progress in its

accession talks with the EU. Most likely, however, the criticism will not be followed by any concrete actions that could actually weaken Turkey's ties with the EU.

For the AKP, a complete breakdown in Turkey's integration process with the European Union would be highly undesirable. Nonetheless, such a scenario could not be ruled out if the EU were to openly question the AKP's credibility as a democratic and reformist political force. This would leave Erdoğan's government little room for manoeuvre, and it is possible that in such a scenario Ankara would take measures to delegitimise the EU.

The EU integration process does not play a significant role in boosting Turkey's standing in the international arena. Its significance in this context is limited to raising Turkey's prestige as a modern democratic state. In fact, the main benefits of Turkey's ties with Europe come from its NATO membership and from its bilateral cooperation with individual European states. Both of these depend only slightly on the status of Turkey's negotiations with the EU. It therefore follows that international affairs will not be an important factor in mobilising the AKP to persevere with the talks. We may expect Ankara to continue pursuing an assertive foreign policy, which will at times depart from the position held by the EU and its member states.

A growing challenge for the future of EU-Turkish relations is the drastically deteriorating image of Europe among Turkish public opinion. If this trend continues – which is rather likely considering the durability of the factors that cause it – there is a real risk that the negative perception of Europe will take deep root among Turkish society. This would reduce the EU's influence over the position of the AKP on the political stage, since the EU would no longer have the capacity to delegitimise the Turkish government. Consequently, assuming that the government in Ankara continues to take public opinion into account when shaping its foreign policy, and that the image of Europe in Turkey deteriorates

further, economic cooperation and the AKP's ideological commitment to the idea of EU integration will remain the only links between the AKP and Europe.

**SZYMON ANANICZ**



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