

Turkey's Putsch and Purge: Why and how the EU should re-engage with Ankara

Steven Blockmans

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From its affirmation of Turkey's candidate country status in 1999, to the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, the EU has used both the symbolism and framework of its enlargement policy to try and instil change in the country. Reforms have followed, especially in those areas where accession negotiations have been opened since 2005. In last year's regular report, the European Commission hailed Turkey's advanced level of preparation in the fields of company law, financial services, science, research, free movement of goods, intellectual property law, enterprise and industrial policy, among others. But in other domains an alarming regression has been lamented, in particular the government's squeeze on the judiciary, its rollback on freedom of expression, and surprising choices in foreign and security policy. Sadly, these fields overlap with the very chapters in which accession talks had either been frozen or blocked by member states because of the Cyprus issue. As a result, the EU has had limited leverage over what one commentator, back in 2009, termed "Turkey's slide towards civil authoritarianism".¹ It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the most important political tool used by the EU to nudge Ankara towards the rule of law rather than the 'law of the ruler' was the annual country report. Arguably, this is not the most effective instrument in the Union's toolbox.

Migration crisis

Similarly, the EU has stood by and watched Turkey absorb more than three million refugees from neighbouring Syria and countries farther away. It was only when huge numbers of refugees and migrants started leaving Turkey for the EU that Brussels rediscovered the importance of dealing with Ankara. But this rediscovery has come at a price.

The hard-nosed EU-Turkey deal, struck to stem the migration flow across the Aegean Sea, has been justly criticised by rights groups for, *inter alia*, the EU's insistence on stopping Syrian refugees from reaching Greece rather than holding up the humanitarian principles promulgated by its constituent treaties. Yet it is undeniable that the deal, in combination with the Union's coaxing of several Balkan countries to close routes north of Greece, has

¹ N. Mert, "The desperate times of Turkey", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2014.

Steven Blockmans is Head of EU Foreign Policy at CEPS and Professor of EU External Relations Law and Governance at the University of Amsterdam.

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proved effective in reducing the numbers of refugees heading for Greece. The EU-Turkey deal has offered both sides a concrete area of mutual interest and bilateral engagement, allowing them to open another chapter in the accession negotiations; to work towards the completion of a visa-free travel regime and conclude a readmission agreement; to associate Turkey to Council meetings; and to agree on EU financial aid to share in Turkey's costs for hosting Syrian refugees on its soil. But acrimony over the implementation of the deal, for instance the EU's demand that Turkey change its broad definition of terrorism in the anti-terror legislation, has exposed the fragility of the deal and the deep mistrust between the partners. It is in this context that Turkey was roiled by a failed military coup on July 15th.

The failed coup and ensuing purge

Whereas High Representative Mogherini and European Commissioner Hahn were quick to condemn the attempted coup and declare EU solidarity with Turkey and its people, the rest of Europe was slow to react. The low level of empathy shown by European leaders after the brutal attack on the candidate country's democratic system was informed by the nature and magnitude of the Turkish government's response: President Erdoğan declared a state of emergency and his cabinet adopted extraordinary measures that led to a draconian purge of political opponents. These opponents are allegedly affiliated to the religious and social movement of the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, an erstwhile ally turned archenemy of President Erdoğan. Gülen has been accused of masterminding the coup. More than 10,000 soldiers have been detained; almost 9,000 police officers and 21,000 Ministry of Education officials fired; more than 2,500 members of the judiciary, 1,500 Ministry of Finance officials and 21,000 private school teachers have been suspended; 1,500 university deans have been forced to resign; and more than 100 media outlets were shut down, with at least 28 'Gülenist' journalists detained.

Faced with a President who has unleashed a crackdown that is unprecedented in modern history, it is understandable that there are concerns among European leaders about the intentions of the Turkish government to uphold European values. Many observers see Erdoğan's actions as further proof of Turkey's slide towards authoritarianism. Whereas aspects of the abortive putsch and whether or not Mr Gülen directed it remain unclear, the evidence indicates that Gülenist army officers were behind it and that there are few reasons to be conspiratorial about it having been staged by Erdoğan himself to tighten his grip on power. Not every military coup succeeds.

Towards re-engagement

Arguably, the limited empathy shown by many Europeans for the assault on Turkey's democracy, in which at least 270 people died, is the result of a low level of understanding of the complex realities in the country. The failed coup has shown the fragility of Turkey's army and state institutions, as well as the 'resilience' (to use one of the buzzwords in the new EU Global Strategy) of a civil society which – although it has become more Islamic over the years – proved united in its rejection of regime change by way of a military junta ousting a democratically elected strongman.

Turkey is now more resilient than before the July 15th attempted coup. Leaving the Kurdish question aside for a moment, Turkey is now a less polarised society and there is more consensus between secularist and Islamist political parties. Until July 15th, the political discourse was shaped by militant nationalists arguing for constitutional reform in order to turn the Republic of Turkey into a presidential system. Now, the concept of democracy is hailed with reference to the citizens who went out onto the streets, stood up to rogue military elements and stopped the coup. It is striking that all opposition parties, including

the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), have rallied behind Erdoğan on this issue.

This is a crucial moment in Turkey's history: the overwhelming majority of society is taking pride in the concept of democracy. Admittedly, there are chilling aspects to the high rhetoric over the summer, such as calls for a reintroduction of capital punishment. But the government is well aware that this constitutes a red line for the European Union which, if crossed, would lead to the suspension and possible termination of Turkish accession process. This is not in Turkey's interest, especially at a time when it is fighting not just the Gülenists but also ISIS and Kurdish 'terrorists' in the east of the country and in Syria.

The stakes are too high now to risk a breakdown in bilateral relations: Turkey and the EU need each other. Megaphone diplomacy is not helpful. Both partners should invest in analysing and better understanding each other's complex realities in order to generate a new momentum of intense engagement and address the many challenges they are facing, both at home and in the common neighbourhood. The war in Syria is bleeding out across the borders; the dynamics in the wider Black Sea region are changing; there is the failed state of Libya; and rising radical Islamism.

What is needed, in fact, is the kind of 'principled pragmatism' that the EU Global Strategy prescribes for the Union's foreign policy: a recognition that exceptional measures were required to safeguard Turkey's democratic institutions against the attempted regime change by a part of the armed forces; but at the same time an insistence that these exceptional measures meet the requirements of proportionality and the rule of law.

This has been the approach taken by key European Parliamentarians such as Elmar Brok (Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee), Kati Piri (Rapporteur on Turkey) and EP President Martin Schulz, who have traded their earlier criticism for a more conciliatory tone after visiting Turkey, while stressing that the country honour its commitments to obtain visa-free travel. If Turkey does not consider the time to be right to change its anti-terror legislation, then it should not expect the Union to stick to the agreed timeline for visa-liberalisation either.

The participation of Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs in the informal Council meeting on September 3rd, and the political dialogue for which Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn will travel to Ankara on September 9th, are further steps to rebuild trust and discuss a host of bilateral and regional issues. Improved cooperation on counter-terrorism and closer coordination of policies towards the common neighbourhood could – as Sinan Ülgen has argued² – help to shape a new narrative that is complementary to that of the rather elusive prospect of future EU membership.

The question, however, is whether that new narrative might ultimately replace "the pretence that accession remains a realistic option for the foreseeable future". The supposedly imminent resolution of the Cyprus issue could help unblock the opening of chapters 23 and 24. This would also assist Turkey in reforming its judiciary and applying fundamental rights, according to best European practices. But it does not, in and of itself, guarantee adherence to European values. Much will depend on how fast and to what extent President Erdoğan and his cabinet allow Turkey to return to a state of normality. That state of normality should be one in which the concept of democracy is applied to more than just the act of voting – with a proper separation of powers, room for a free press, and a reconciliatory process in society that includes the Kurdish minority.

² S. Ülgen, "Turkey needs reassurance of the west's friendship", *Financial Times*, 15 August 2016.