

Turkey makes a mockery of Europe's claim to uphold democratic values

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The 7 March EU-Turkey migration crisis summit took place three days after the Turkish authorities seized Feza media group, which includes Turkey's largest circulation daily Zaman and its English language sister paper Today's Zaman. The seizure was the latest development in the worst crackdown on fundamental rights and freedoms Turkey has witnessed in decades. Yet because Turkey is vital in dealing with the migration/refugee crisis, the EU's response was meek to say the least. For the first time since the Cold War – when Turkey was key in shoring up Europe's security – Ankara has found itself in a particular position of strength. Turkey has skillfully exploited the EU's and particularly German Chancellor Angela Merkel's urgent need to find a way out of the crisis.

Turkey is calling the shots

Since the beginning of the migration/refugee crisis the EU – in what could be described as a state of panic –, has offered Turkey economic and political 'gifts' to stop the flow of refugees to Europe. Turkey's leadership has used this fear not only to strengthen its own position in the negotiations with the EU, but also as an opportunity to increase the crackdown on dissent and critical voices at home. While this crackdown may have happened anyway, the response of the EU is likely to have been more robust. When news broke on 4 March that the seizure of Zaman was imminent, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, along with two European Commissioners, Frans Timmermans and Johannes Hahn, were visiting Turkey. That such a development took place on the same day that Ankara was discussing the speeding up of EU accession negotiations underlines that Turkey's leadership is confident that its leverage over the EU is now so great it can almost do whatever it wants. This approach continued when Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu arrived in Brussels for the summit, where he presented EU leaders with a new set of requests to guarantee Ankara's full cooperation. While key elements of the proposals had been pre-discussed with Chancellor Merkel, for the vast majority of EU leaders this development came as a surprise. It included another €3 billion in addition to the €3 billion already pledged, the delivery of visa liberalisation for Turks by June 2016 instead of the earlier agreed October, and a speeding up of the accession process by opening a number of blocked chapters. In return, he proposed a "one-for-one deal" i.e. that for every Syrian refugee that Turkey takes back from Greece the EU would resettle one Syrian refugee from camps in Turkey.

One year ago, most EU leaders had little interest in speeding up Turkey's accession and visa liberalisation processes or opening new chapters. Turkey's accession negotiations had been *de facto* frozen for at least five years. Ankara has successfully used the crisis to bring about a step-change from the EU. This development shows that the lack of strategic investment in relations with Turkey was shortsighted: it has resulted in the EU losing political leverage over Ankara. The opening of chapters are not 'gifts' but roadmaps for reform. If the EU had allowed the accession talks to run their course, not only could this have made negotiating with Turkey easier, it may also have partially prevented the democratic backslide currently taking place.

Clearly, the deal is controversial but if it is adopted and implemented, it might very well represent a breakthrough in the crisis. According to Tusk, there is still "hard work" to do, to make the deal "acceptable" to all 28 member states. The question of the legality of the one-for-one-deal needs to be clarified, while some leaders are uncomfortable with

opening chapters in light of the ongoing crackdown on fundamental rights and freedoms. However, possibly the biggest hurdle is the continuing refusal of Cyprus to open any chapters unless Ankara recognises Cyprus – a condition set by the EU that Turkey still has not met. Recognition is also a condition for Turkey to receive visa liberalisation. The timing is particularly sensitive as talks aimed at the reunification of Cyprus are now at a crucial phase. There is a common interest in both Turkey and the EU for a deal, so some form of compromise deal may be reached on 17-18 March, although agreeing on precisely how it will be implemented may take some time.

Turkey's dangerous trajectory

Despite Ankara's narrative Turkey's leadership is not interested in EU membership. Ankara's insistence on opening chapters seems nothing more than a show. Given the government's track record, there is little chance of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) carrying out serious political reform or returning to a democratic track. This would require strengthening the rule of law as well as fundamental rights and freedoms – everything the AKP has eroded over the past few years in order to strengthen its grip on power. It seems rather likely that the crackdown against critical voices and opponents will continue. Turkey's foreign policy is mainly being used to strengthen the political ambitions of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who wants to transform Turkey's parliamentary system of governance to an Executive Presidency with little or no checks and balances. The EU-Turkey deal, which has been sold to Turks as "the Turkish plan", is being actively used to harvest support.

Turkey's leadership is on a dangerous trajectory and the current policy of the EU is making the journey easier. The Union is viewing every aspect of its relationship with Turkey through the prism of the migration/refugee crisis. With this approach the EU is both morally bankrupting itself and at the same time helping push Turkey deeper into authoritarianism. Furthermore, the EU is sending a very wrong signal to other candidate countries.

But the EU and its members are stronger than they think. Ankara's relationship with the EU is important as Turkey's economy, trade and technology are deeply rooted in Europe. Moreover, Turkey finds itself increasingly isolated. Trade relations with the countries of the Middle East have been ruined due to the war in Syria, while those with Russia have been spoiled as a consequence of Turkey shooting down a Russian jet in November 2015. As a consequence, Ankara's relationship with Europe is more important than ever. Unfortunately, EU leaders seem to have forgotten this fact and continue to negotiate with Turkey from a self-imposed position of weakness.

While the EU needs to negotiate with Turkey over the migration/refugee crisis, which may open the door to closer cooperation in other areas, the EU must not be seen to keep brushing fundamental rights and freedoms under the carpet. In order to maintain its credibility, including with those continuing to push for freedoms in Turkey, this issue needs to be a core topic on the EU's agenda with Ankara and not just a footnote. If it is not, it will set a dangerous precedent that could blight the EU for years to come.

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