



Increasingly tense relationship between Turkey, the European Union and the rest of the world

Turkey is a strategically important country. It is part of Europe and the Middle East, and at the same time, it forms a bridge to Asia. It has a population of about 80 million and hundreds of thousands are living in the diaspora—especially in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Due to the conflicts in the Middle East and the immense influx of refugees, its importance has become even bigger and extends well beyond Turkey.

The coup attempt of 15 July 2016 poses questions about the future stability of this NATO and EU-candidate country—which is already a key partner in the ongoing fight against the self-styled Islamic State and other terrorist groups in the region, as well as in the reception of a very high number of Syrian refugees. Its stability is a primary concern to the international community, as Turkey’s problems could affect our stability as well.

A few days ago all of us were surprised by a sudden coup against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The coup attempt failed but it was able to create a significant risk for the government because of the bombing of the Turkish Parliament. However, in the end the junta leaders failed to take control of key political and security institutions in Ankara. The main reason why the coup attempt failed was the overwhelming response of Turkish society in favour of rule of law and democracy. A strong display of solidarity, including from opposition groups, against the military intervention constituted an effective bulwark against the military plotters. It remains to be seen how the situation will evolve from here.

Democracy, rule of law and human rights are at stake!

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has stated that the environment in Turkey for human rights deteriorated in 2015 due to the government and its policies. “Turkey’s trajectory is toward authoritarianism and the dismantling of all checks on the power of its leaders,” said Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher at Human Rights Watch. ¹

More specifically, one cannot ignore that President Erdogan attempts to silence criticism. During 2015, we have seen a growing repression of the media²; freedom of expression is a key indicator of a country's readiness to become part of the EU³. Limits on free speech continue unabated. On 20 May 2016, the Turkish parliament voted to lift immunity from prosecution of a quarter of its deputies, especially the Kurdish parliamentarians.⁴ This is in line with Amnesty International’s

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/27/turkey-deteriorating-climate-rights>

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/turkey-has-reached-new-levels-of-journalist-repression-yet-the-eu-willingly-lets-itself-be-fooled-a6944501.html>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/policy-highlights/media-freedom/index_en.htm

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/20/turkish-parliament-votes-to-lift-mps-immunity-as-erdogan-acts-ag/>

concerns regarding Turkey; a few months ago, they condemned Turkey's treatment of Kurds.⁵ Furthermore, the government has been criticized for changing the secular system upon which Ataturk built modern Turkey and introducing a role for Islam into political life. Immediately after the coup attempt, the Turkish government arrested thousands of people—such as military personnel, police officers, judges, finance ministry staff, education ministry staff, interior ministry employees, and provincial governors.⁶ The ambition of the President is to replace Turkey's parliamentary democracy with a powerful executive presidency. This is another big step in the erosion of the separation of powers which the government has been pursuing.

US Tactical Weapons in Turkey

The country has been a part of NATO since 1952 and has United States' tactical nuclear weapons on its soil. At the air base at Incirlik, the US keeps the biggest cache in Europe—about 50 B-61 nuclear bombs stored in 21 vaults.⁷ The US makes use of the air base, which is 68 miles from the Syrian border, to fly missions into Syria. President Erdogan made a strong plea at the latest NATO summit in Warsaw⁸ for support against all forms of terrorism, which in his view includes the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

Long history of Turkey with the European Union⁹

If Turkey reinstates the death penalty, then the country can correctly forget becoming a member of the EU. For decades Turkish leaders have been approaching the EU for possible membership.

Turkey has had, by far, the most difficult time progressing towards EU membership.¹⁰ In 1963, the six member states of the then European Economic Community (EEC) signed an agreement with Turkey, confirming and extending the existing ties between the EEC and Turkey. This "Ankara Agreement"¹¹ was at that time considered, within both the EEC and Turkey, as a first step toward discussions on possible membership. However, it is remarkable that this agreement celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2013 and that the special relationship still exists without Turkey having become a member of the European Union. This indicates a complex relationship between Ankara and the EU, as other countries have joined the EU who were also not in complete compliance with the Copenhagen criteria.¹²

Turkey sees itself as a bridge between West and East, between Europe and Asia, and at the border with the Middle East. Turkey believes that it belongs to the West. Turkey feels it isn't accepted by the West. But thanks to the European Union there are no taboos anymore in discussing issues such as the Kurdish and the Armenian issues, although the topics are still very sensitive. There is not unanimity among the EU member states about possible membership (is Turkey ready for

⁵ <http://www.voanews.com/content/amnesty-calls-turkeys-campaign-against-kurds-collective-punishment/3155683.html>

⁶ http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/19/the-purge-after-the-coup-turkey-erdogan/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=*Editors%20Picks

⁷ <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-h-bombs-in-turkey>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-president-erdogan-of-turkey-9-july-2016>

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey/index_en.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/infobox-arguments-for-and-against-turkeys-eu-membership/#.VZpKjnICSM8>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ankara_Agreement

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.htm

membership?) and both successive governments and public opinion in Turkey have been changing their mind on the matter. Turkey still has to normalise its relations with Greek-Cyprus, and there are serious concerns about the respect for freedom of speech and democracy, maltreatment of the opposition, the treatment of minorities, women's and children's rights, refugees and the civilian control of the military. It is vital that they strengthen democracy and human rights through judicial reform before they have a chance of becoming a Member State.

Others worry that Turkey, as a mainly Muslim country, would change the dynamics of the EU; however, they would provide a younger labour force that could help an aging Europe. The first concern of Turkey is the civil war in Syria and its impact for the whole region of the Middle East.

After the presidential elections in Turkey ended in August 2014 and a new government was established, Turkey and the EU started a renewed discussion about possible accession, which is now part of Turkey's domestic agenda. The main issues are: trade and economic integration; the EU accession process including visa liberalization, mobility and migration (irregular migration); foreign policy interactions; and counterterrorism. The regional situation calls for increased consistency between Turkey's and the EU's foreign policy goals. Turmoil along Turkey's south-eastern border has become a threat to the EU's homeland security as well as to Turkey's.

Impact of Syrian war on Turkey

The rise of the Islamic State since June 2014 has largely changed the situation in Syria and Iraq with massive consequences for Turkey: more refugees, asylum requests, and resettlement concerns, attacks on Syrian Kurds, repercussions for the Turkish Kurds, transit of jihadists to and from Syria, and exports of oil from Islamic State controlled territories.

As of mid-May 2016, more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees are living in Turkey¹³ and many of them tried in 2015 to cross the border with Bulgaria—which is also the border with the EU. Turkey is now confronted with a heavy humanitarian burden and a direct impact on its own society.

On 18 March 2016, the EU made a deal with Turkey on the refugee crisis.¹⁴ With this deal, the EU is providing about 6 billion Euro in return for Turkey taking back refugees who had entered the EU illegally through Greece. At the same time the EU opened new chapters of Ankara's possible accession negotiations. How will the new developments in Turkey influence these negotiations? The EU has already warned that the introduction of the death penalty would mean no EU membership¹⁵, but what about all the other democracy, rule of state and human rights violations that are piling up at the moment?

Cyprus as a frozen conflict

Another significant conflict within the European Union was the issue of the division of Cyprus between Turkish-Cyprus and Greek-Cyprus.¹⁶ In this situation, EU accession was perceived to be aimed towards finding a resolution to the division of the island and to create pressure to reach a solution. It has been determined that the most progress in resolving the conflict was done within

¹³ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

¹⁴ <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/paradox-eu-turkey-refugee-deal>

¹⁵ <https://www.rt.com/news/351830-turkey-death-penalty-eu/>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus_dispute

the last three years before accession, with accession effectively acting as a major catalyst in discussions of reuniting. Although the country is reunited and a member of the EU today, the use of EU accession as a catalyst did not have a completely positive outcome on the situation between Turkey and Cyprus. At the Luxembourg summit of 1997, Cyprus was accepted as a candidate country despite the fact that it was still divided at the time. Meanwhile, at the same summit, Turkey was told that it had to work on finding a solution to the Turkey-Cyprus conflict before it would become a candidate country. This had utterly disastrous effects on EU-Turkey relations. A new round of UN talks on Cyprus began in May 2015 after a lengthy pause.

If there is a reset in EU-Turkey negotiations, one should not only focus on the refugee deal but much broader cooperation is essential, such as on the rule of law and freedom of expression and on the peace process with the Kurds in Turkey's southeast.

~ Brussels, 20 July 2016

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