



EUROPEAN  
COUNCIL  
ON FOREIGN  
RELATIONS  
ecfr.eu

POLICY  
BRIEF

# TURKEY'S ILLIBERAL TURN

Dimitar Bechev

## SUMMARY

Turkey is sliding back on its democratisation path. During the conservative Justice and Development Party's third term in power, majoritarianism has triumphed over a drive to broaden pluralism and entrench the rule of law. The concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the prevalence of the executive over the judicial branch, flawed media, and unabating polarisation in political life are all symptoms of democratic deadlock. Having turned its back on Turkey, the EU has seen its leverage plummet; Turkey itself has become selective when it comes to membership-oriented reforms.

As the country elects a new president in August, it faces a host of challenges: slowing growth and financial volatility, the peace process with the PKK, and an increasingly unstable regional environment. Though Turkey is largely in an introverted mood, those challenges underscore the significance of its foreign partners, not least the EU. The reshuffle at the top offers an opportunity for the EU and its member states to re-engage Ankara in order to prevent further drift. This brief argues that the EU needs to focus on pragmatic co-operation and open key chapters in the accession talks while making sure its policies and actions do not feed into the narratives of external threat that have gained prominence in Turkish politics.

A decade ago it seemed as if, with the help of the EU, Turkey was becoming a liberal democracy. Even after Turkey's membership talks stalled in 2007, many thought that the country would continue to consolidate democratic governance, human and minority rights, the rule of law, and media freedom. A new constitution was in the making to dismantle residue authoritarianism and rebalance relations between the omnipotent state machine and society. In 2011, Turkey even seemed to be a model for the Middle East and North Africa following the Arab revolutions. In particular, it was hoped that the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party rooted in political Islam, could help spread democratic rule and free markets and co-operate to assist the transition to more pluralist regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia.

This bold vision is now all but dead. The vicious war in Syria and the coup in Egypt have shattered Ankara's aspirations to act as a regional hegemon advancing economic integration, open borders, and government legitimised by free elections. Meanwhile, the protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park in the summer of 2013, as well as the corruption scandal which erupted in December, did serious harm to Turkey's own democratic credentials. Yet although banning Twitter and YouTube ahead of local elections in March may have dealt a final blow to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's image in the West, he won 42.8 percent of the vote. Turkey now seems less like an "advanced democracy" (*ileri demokrasi*), with all its vestiges such as rule of law, checks and balances, and decision-making based on public deliberation, than what Fareed Zakaria has termed an "illiberal democracy".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

This brief discusses the root causes and dynamics behind Turkey's illiberal turn and makes recommendations on how the EU should respond. It argues that there are no quick fixes to remedy Turkey's democratic ills. Ankara is in isolationist mode and the outside world, and above all the EU, is invoked mostly to underscore imaginary threats to national sovereignty, which, in turn, feed into domestic polarisation. Europe should therefore work its way around, rather than against, Erdoğan, and hope for change from Turkish society in the long term. The presidential elections in August, when Turkish citizens will for the first time choose their head of state, could produce new opportunities.

## What went wrong?

Erdoğan is the target of heated criticism, both inside Turkey and abroad, for his paternalistic attitude, lack of tolerance for dissenting opinion, and sultan-like demeanour. However, in his own eyes he is and always has been an exemplary democrat. He is the leader who has empowered the previously marginalised socially conservative masses, the proverbial “black Turks”, both in the heartlands of Anatolia and in Western Turkey's metropolises inhabited by first- and second-generation migrants. The AKP oversaw a dramatic improvement in their living standards as a decade of almost uninterrupted economic surge delivered higher incomes, better and more accessible healthcare, and a serious upgrade of public infrastructure. There is also a clear prospect for resolving the Kurdish issue, the most formidable challenge in Turkish politics, thanks to the peace process (re-)launched in the spring of 2013 by the government and the formally outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Local elections showed the government's ability to weather both Gezi and the high-profile corruption scandal leading to the downfall of four ministers and implicating the prime minister's inner circle, notably his son Bilâl.<sup>2</sup> The adage commonly murmured by Turks in the wake of the corruption scandal has been “yes, he steals but he also does the job” (*çalıyor ama iş yapıyor*). It is true that Erdoğan's personal approval ratings have declined over the past year by more than 15 percentage points. The clash with the influential cleric Fethullah Gülen, whose adherents in the judiciary and police are seen as driving the corruption probe, has taken its toll.<sup>3</sup> Yet the prime minister's popularity is still at respectable

levels and he is able to defend his turf through the ballot box.<sup>4</sup> According to a poll after the March local elections, the percentage of people who thought Erdoğan should be the republic's next president went up from 13.1 to 26.8, as compared to 23 percent for the incumbent Abdullah Gül.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Erdoğan believes he has both “input” and “output” legitimacy. In his victory speech following the March elections, he said that “the democracy that the West is longing for already exists with us”.<sup>6</sup> In the West, levels of public trust in elites have declined and constrained the ability of institutions to deliver on popular expectations. By contrast, the AKP has broadened its appeal over time: it won 34.8 percent in the 2002 elections, 46.6 percent in 2007, and 49.8 percent in 2011. In absolute terms, the AKP doubled its votes in comparison to 2002 (from 10 to 21.4 million).<sup>7</sup> The subsequent drop in popularity is far from dramatic: 42.8 percent (17.8m) supported AKP candidates in the local polls. It is therefore hardly surprising that Erdoğan's favourite catchphrase is “national will” (*millî irade*), a reference to the popular mandate bestowed on the party and him personally by a clear-cut majority.

However, this majoritarian reading of democracy is at odds with a society as divided as Turkey's. Admittedly, years of prosperity, the growth of the middle classes, inner migration, and urbanisation have partly mended long-standing cleavages between centre and periphery, secular and conservative, and left and right. Yet Erdoğan's personality and abrasive rhetoric continue to polarise public opinion. Instead of addressing opponents in the spirit of compromise, as President Abdullah Gül did during Gezi, he dismisses them as stooges of unnamed foreign powers, “the interest-rate lobby”, all acting to counter Turkey's rising power and ever wider ambitions.

Such attacks tap deep into nationalist traumas and myths inherited from the country's turbulent history.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, the fight against the Gülenists was presented as yet another episode of the epic struggle between elected, accountable leaders and behind-the-scenes operators (labelled “the parallel state” or “the parallel structure”) orchestrating a coup through the judiciary, with the master puppeteer stationed in the US: the AKP is again under attack, victimised by its perennial enemies in the state establishment. The net result of such political strategy is that Erdoğan is a leader whom one either adores or intensely hates, with few remaining indifferent.

2 The corruption scandal kicked off on 17 December 2013 with the arrest of 47 officials, one of Istanbul's district mayors, a real-estate tycoon, a top bank manager, and an Iranian businessman. The allegations included high-profile bribery linked to the international sanctions imposed on Iran. Three of those arrested were sons of members of the cabinet. A second wave of arrests followed on 23 December. The government reacted by sacking or reassigning scores of prosecutors and high-ranking police officials, and with a cabinet reshuffle.

3 The *Hizmet* (service) movement dates back to the 1970s. It operates a wide network of educational institutions, in Turkey and abroad, businesses, and media outlets (notably *Zaman*, Turkey's highest circulation daily newspaper). Conservative in outlook, it was long allied with the AKP in the struggle against the Kemalist bureaucracy and military establishment, and its supporters in the judiciary are popularly linked to prominent court cases such as *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer). Fethullah Gülen, its spiritual leader, has lived in exile in the US since 1999, after the then government charged him with plotting to overthrow the secular regime. A prominent advocate of interfaith dialogue, he has been very critical of the Turkish government's clash with Israel after 2010.

4 At the depth of the corruption scandal, in January 2014, the MetroPOLL polling agency found the prime minister's popularity falling to 39.4 percent – down from 48.1 percent in December 2013. See Turkey's Pulse, January 2014, available at <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiyenin-nabzi-ocak-2014-yolsuzluk-ve-cemaat-hukumet-tartismalari>.

5 Turkey's Pulse, April 2014, available at <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiyenin-nabzi-nisan-2014-yerel-secim-sonrasi-turkiye-ve-cumhurbaskanligi-secimi>.

6 A summary of the victory speech is available at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/tbmm/haberler/gelin-yeni-bir-sayfa-acalim/61837>; see also Joe Parkinson and Emre Peker, “Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan Gains Ground in Turkish Elections”, *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 2014, available at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303978304579470752756039522>.

7 Paradoxically, the number of parliamentary seats won by the AKP has decreased from 363 (2002) to 341 (2007), to 327 (2011), owing to the intricacies of the Turkish electoral system.

8 Ironically, similar allegations were often levelled at Erdoğan himself by his ultranationalist critics in the past. He was casually denigrated as America's fifth column and even as a Zionist serving foreign plots to carve out Turkey's territory, not unlike the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the First World War.

There are various social groups that feel excluded from “the national will” and harbour hostility towards the prime minister. Hardcore secularists, fond of chanting “we are Mustafa Kemal’s soldiers” at rallies, never liked Erdoğan in the first instance, to put it very mildly. But he has also lost the support of the liberal left who were once backing him in the fight against the military and the Kemalist “deep state”, including in the September 2010 constitutional referendum.<sup>9</sup> Fellow travellers of liberal persuasion were dropped from the AKP candidate lists prior to the 2011 elections. Gülen’s conservative supporters, once a key ally, are now listed as foes too, once under-the-surface tensions sprang into the open with the corruption scandal.

In addition, it has not helped either that the majority of those killed during the Gezi protests turned out to be members of the heterodox Alevi community. Together with Ankara’s policies in Syria, where it emerged as a principal backer of the opposition along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood, this fact has once more underlined the AKP’s identity as an overwhelmingly Sunni political movement.<sup>10</sup> The electorate of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) bears a grudge against Erdoğan over the ongoing negotiations with the PKK. For their part, the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (HDP), which is tactically aligned with the government, has been broadening its support in the south-east provinces, at the expense of the AKP.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the majoritarian paradigm cannot accommodate and deal with complex divisions in Turkish society and politics over the long term, even if it does deliver the goods at present.

The rule of law and separation of powers – which in a mature democracy is the antidote to the excesses of majoritarianism – has taken a serious hit with the corruption scandal, which was closed through executive intrusion into the judicial sphere. In addition to the firing of nearly a hundred magistrates suspected of loyalty to Gülen, the government moved to reform the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (*Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu*, HSYK) administering the judiciary. The reform gave extensive powers to the justice minister, raising concerns by the European Commission about judicial independence. Judges tried to reassert their authority, with the Constitutional Court (AYM) overturning the government’s controversial ban of Twitter and YouTube. Erdoğan then took issue with the “unnational” ruling and lambasted the AYM’s president Haşim Kılıç.<sup>12</sup> But when the AYM ordered the re-trial of convicts under the landmark *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) case in June, the prime minister adopted a more conciliatory tone, arguing that the decision

had been made possible by the AKP, which had introduced the individual right to petition the high court.<sup>13</sup>

The strengthening of the executive relative to other branches is also visible in the highly contentious law on the National Intelligence Organisation (*Millî İstihbarat Teşkilâtı*, MIT), which was passed in April. It broadens the agency’s powers without proper oversight and gives immunity from prosecution to its operatives. The parliamentary opposition slammed the law as another instance of creeping authoritarianism.

The corruption scandal and the bitter struggle in its wake exposed the flawed state of Turkish media. Leaked tapes showed Erdoğan reproaching and giving direct instructions to one of the bosses of Habertürk TV, over the coverage of the Gezi protests (the prime minister dismissed the tape as a fake). At a million-strong election rally in March, Erdoğan accused media mogul Aydın Doğan of being part of Gülen’s “parallel state”. Turkey’s laws are also to blame. The 2006 Anti-Terror Law resulted in dozens of journalists being imprisoned. The MIT bill provides for prison terms of up to 10 years for journalists publishing leaked information. In its most recent report (2013), the international watchdog Reporters Without Borders downgraded Turkey to 154th out of 180 in terms of media freedom, quoting, among other things, journalists in jail and self-censorship as the rationale. By comparison, the country ranked 98th in 2005.

Like the media and the judiciary, parliament is also failing to act as a corrective. A few years ago, there were prospects for cross-partisanship. In 2011, the AKP failed to reach a constitutional majority needed to pass amendments to the basic law to be endorsed by plebiscite, as in 2007 and 2010. In theory, this should have empowered the three opposition forces – the Republican People’s Party (CHP), MHP and HDP – to provide a healthy counterbalance against an assertive executive branch. But the unending sharp polarisation in political life, along with the resultant deadlock at the parliamentary commission charged with drafting a new constitution, torpedoed prospects for a cross-party consensus on the basic law.<sup>14</sup> The AKP abandoned co-operation with the opposition and effectively deferred plans for a constitutional overhaul, concentrating instead on short-term priorities such as dealing with Gezi, weathering the corruption scandal, and winning the local elections.

The opposition is debilitated by its own shortcomings, too. The CHP, a coalition of pro-European social democrats and Kemalist diehards, is still a long way from representing a real alternative capable of knocking the AKP from power. In theory, it could join forces with the MHP and HDP in an

<sup>9</sup> See the essays in Dimitar Bechev (ed.), “What Does Turkey Think?”, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2011, available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR35\\_TURKEYFINALFINAL.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR35_TURKEYFINALFINAL.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Another highly controversial move is naming the projected third bridge over the Bosphorus after Sultan Selim I “the Grim”, who slaughtered thousands of Alevis in 1514.

<sup>11</sup> The HDP was originally established in October 2012 as a sister party of the main Kurdish political force, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Its purpose was to attract leftist votes in Western Turkey. As of April 2014, the two parties practically merged.

<sup>12</sup> In 2008, Justice Kılıç voted “against” when the AKP closure case was heard.

<sup>13</sup> A penal court in Istanbul then ordered the release of convicts from prison pending their retrial. Sledgehammer broke out in 2010 when an investigative journalist published a story about a plot by high-level military commanders to foment a coup back in 2003. Three hundred of the defendants, including several generals, were sentenced to prison terms.

<sup>14</sup> The Constitutional Reconciliation Commission, where all four parliamentary parties are represented by equal quotas, convened in October 2011, setting itself a 12-month deadline for a new draft. It has reached consensus on only 60 out of 150 articles.

unlikely coalition that would collectively command around 55 percent of the vote. The party's candidate for Ankara's mayoral election, Mansur Yavaş, originally an MHP man, came 10,000 votes short of winning in March. The narrow margin prompted allegations of vote rigging. But the party needs to produce and field similar unifying figures, who are, on top of that, convincing for disappointed AKP supporters in the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

The choice of Ekmelettin Ihsanoğlu – a scholar of religion who served as secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – as a presidential candidate, is a step in that direction, though the CHP hardcore Kemalist grassroots are likely to boycott. Ihsanoğlu was jointly nominated with the MHP.<sup>15</sup> But adding the Kurds to form a grand coalition opposed to Erdoğan is not in the cards. As long as the Kurdish peace process is on track, the HDP will prefer to co-operate with Erdoğan rather than what it considers the parties of the *ancien régime* wedded to the notion of Turkey as a nation made by a single ethnicity. And one should not forget that the AKP is the only nationwide party. The CHP is virtually non-existent in the east and south-east, the HDP is largely confined in the Kurdish region, while MHP is mostly to be found in Central Anatolia and parts of the west.

In sum, the AKP's third term in power has cemented the plebiscite system described by Zakaria, in which the ballot box and a charismatic, if short-fused, leader reign supreme. Taken together, Erdoğan's polarising politics, the 40-percent-plus pro-government bloc, the rule of law deficit (which, in all fairness, goes much further in the past than the AKP's advent to power), and the feeble opposition all explain the detour in Turkey's democratisation saga.

## A critical juncture

Turkey is now at a critical juncture. A series of elections is bound to define its trajectory for years to come. In August, voters will for the first time directly elect the republic's president. The AKP's strong showing at the local polls paves Erdoğan's path from the prime minister's office to the presidential palace in Ankara's Çankaya district. The odds of him winning the race against Ihsanoğlu are overwhelming; the only question is whether he will win in the first round or face a run-off. The reshuffle at the top of Turkish politics will have momentous consequences. Erdoğan has also called for a constitutional change transforming Turkey to a presidential republic. In November 2012, the party submitted a detailed proposal, which came under fire over its clash with fundamental principles related to the separation of powers. Although it has effectively been shelved, it has inflated suspicions and fears among the opposition.<sup>16</sup> The AKP seems

to be internally split; sociological data indicate that only part of its voters favour the idea.<sup>17</sup>

Even without a constitutional change, Erdoğan will use the presidency to wield maximum power. Direct election would provide the popular mandate for a head of state, which goes far beyond the ceremonial functions inherent to a parliamentary system. But he could also make use of powers that the president has under the current constitutional setup, such as chairing the sessions of the cabinet. Such a scenario may well lead to rivalry with the future prime minister, especially if a heavyweight as current President Abdullah Gül decides to take up the offer.<sup>18</sup> Even if AKP selects a technocratic figure charged with implementing, rather than taking, decisions, there is a risk of friction and instability at the country's helm. On the other hand, the inauguration of a prime minister charged with the day-to-day running of the economy will surely present opportunities, including for the EU.

Of course, a full-blown switch to a semi-presidential or presidential regime is not to be ruled out. Once Erdoğan is installed in the Çankaya Palace, he could push once more for constitutional change to overhaul the organisation of the executive branch. Together with the Kurdish HDP, the AKP has enough seats in the present parliament to pass a draft, which could then be put to a referendum. However, the HDP would not trade its support for anything less than a constitutional status for the Kurdish community and radical decentralisation of power leading to *de facto* autonomy for the south-eastern provinces. That would be too much to swallow for both the ruling party and the Turkish majority, though there is sufficient support for the so-called peace process (see below). Alternatively, Erdoğan could wait for the next parliament, betting on the expansion of the AKP caucus. General elections could even be moved to the end of 2014. The high levels of polarisation, along with the marginal decline of support for the AKP registered in March, make such a strategy risky.

In short, whatever happens, the AKP will preserve control over commanding heights in Turkish politics. What could change are relations within the party and, more specifically, Erdoğan's relative power. Still, the scenario where there is no formal installation of a presidential republic offers opportunities for a more even distribution of authority. The flipside, of course, is the prospects for internal friction stymieing the government's policymaking capacity.

<sup>15</sup> After the announcement of his candidacy, Ihsanoğlu paid a visit to Atatürk's mausoleum in Ankara, but such symbolic gestures fall short in convincing hard-line secularists.

<sup>16</sup> Problematic features included simultaneous elections for president and parliament; the president's powers to pass and block legislation and dissolve parliament, and, under a subsequent proposal tabled in February 2013, the president's broadened role in appointing members of the HSYK and the Constitutional Court.

<sup>17</sup> In September 2012, the think-tank TESEV found out that 44.7 percent of AKP voters support a presidential constitution as compared to 30.9 percent in favour of a parliamentary regime and 24.4 percent "don't know". See Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), *Definitions and Expectations Regarding the New Constitution*, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> In April, Gül announced that he was not interested in a job swap. However, this might turn out to be a bargaining tactic to wrest maximum leeway should he accept. See Cengiz Çandar, "Gül will not play Medvedev to Erdoğan's Putin", *Al-Monitor*, 21 April 2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2014/04/gul-medvedev-erdogan-putin.html#>.



## Turkey's challenges

The coming reshuffle at Turkey's top will be judged against the backdrop of the AKP's track record. In the final analysis, its legitimacy rests upon its credibility as the purveyor of working solutions. There are three key issues: first, the clouds gathering over Turkey's economy; second, the ongoing peace negotiations with the PKK and its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan; and third, the delicate predicament in foreign policy, including the fallout from the war in Syria and the crisis in Ukraine.

### *The economy*

Prosperity is a central part of the AKP package. The state of Turkey's economy is a powerful predictor of attitudes of the median voter who by and large holds a favourable view of the status quo (especially if compared to the pre-2001 years of high inflation and cycles of boom and bust). The first time the governing party lost votes in absolute terms was at the local elections in 2009, at the depth of the worldwide financial crisis when the Turkish economy contracted. The swing vote, driven by the health of the economy rather than party loyalty or ideology, makes a huge difference as it might tip the balance either way above or below the 40 percent threshold.

After robust growth in 2010 and 2011, Turkey's economy slowed to 4 percent, partly as a result of the euro crisis. Growth is driven by domestic consumption, credit expansion, and investment rather than exports, leading to unbalanced trade and a chronic current account deficit. In 2013, loans to households soared by a staggering 28 percent year-on-year. This equilibrium poses a threat to stability: if financial transfers (both FDI and short-term portfolio investment or "hot money") dry up, it could lead to a devaluation of the Turkish lira (TL), inflation, and an end to the boom in consumption and construction. This would deal a blow to the AKP's core narrative – a mixture of conservative values, consumerism, and large state-backed projects. International financial markets are the sole remaining corrective on Turkey's government, given the lacklustre opposition and the withering away of the EU anchor.

This is a risk well understood in Ankara. When US Federal Reserve signals of rate hikes ("tapering") sent the TL downwards, the Turkish government prevented the Central Bank from putting the interest rates up in order to defend the lira and stem the outflow of capital. It was fearful that a more restrictive policy would take its toll on consumer spending and investment right before the local elections. The government was keen to project an image of stability and continued expansion – for example, the Marmaray tunnel linking Europe and Asia under the Bosphorus unveiled in late October 2013. Though in January, the Central Bank finally increased its interest rate from 7.75 to 12.5 percent, the overdue move left a sense of executive meddling with a notionally independent body.

Though the crisis has been weathered and rates were cut in April (following calls from Erdoğan), Turkey remains vulnerable to external shocks. Phasing out low interest rates in the developed economies (for example, through quantitative easing in the US) will divert investors away from the emerging world. Renewed pressure on the TL could expose the corporate sector, which has gone on a borrowing spree since 2008 and holds 90 percent in foreign currency. Worryingly, a third of Turkey's external debt (\$129 billion) is due in 2015.<sup>19</sup> There is political risk, too: Erdoğan has been tempted to assert himself over the Central Bank, despite resistance from cabinet ministers with a technocratic profile such as Mehmet Şimşek and Ali Babacan.<sup>20</sup> Business people express concern about political meddling and appointments of party loyalists in a range of regulatory bodies. The future prime minister will have to ensure that the Central Bank preserves the maximum degree of independence and that foreign investors are not deterred.

### *The Kurdish peace process*

The so-called "solution process" (*çözüm süreci*) is a key reason why Erdoğan and the AKP have not fully jettisoned the transformation agenda of the 2000s. But much of what has been achieved so far comes under the rubric of "negative peace" – the declaration of a ceasefire coupled with the partial withdrawal of PKK guerrillas into their bases in northern Iraq.<sup>21</sup> The difficult steps, including the transfer of Abdullah Öcalan from high-security confinement to house arrest, a constitutional status for the Kurds, Kurdish in public education as a core rather than elective subject, and "democratic autonomy" for the south-east lie ahead. The AKP leadership has to correctly sequence such steps, trade them against concessions from the Kurds, and carry public opinion among the ethnic Turkish majority.

Sealing a final deal will not be easy, especially given the opposition parties' estrangement (the CHP is at best lukewarm, while the MHP has traditionally been hostile). For their part, Kurdish politicians and activists are distrustful of the AKP. While Erdoğan is the best bet for realising their demands, there is a perception that the government's actions are about managing the issue rather than solving it. The tensions between Ankara and the PKK's Syrian branch, PYD, which blames Turkey for nurturing enemy jihadi militias, are also feeding in.

Last but not least, the pro-Kurdish HDP remains faithful to its Marxist roots; eager to woo left-wing voters in Western Turkey, it never misses an opportunity to take on the

---

<sup>19</sup> For a gloomy take on the economy's prospects, see Jesse Colombo, "Why the Worst is Still Ahead for Turkey's Bubble Economy", *Forbes*, 3 May 2014, available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jessecolombo/2014/03/05/why-the-worst-is-still-ahead-for-turkeys-bubble-economy/>.

<sup>20</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç has recently stepped in as an ally of Governor Erdem Başçı and the group of technocrats within the cabinet insisting on prudential long-term policies.

<sup>21</sup> Other measures include allowing village signs in Kurdish as well as the usage of previously forbidden characters such as "q", "x", and "w" that are used in Kurdish but not Turkish.

conservative government. After the Soma mining disaster, for instance, it hung a placard at its Ankara headquarters saying, “We will not remain silent facing the massacre of workers”. There were prominent Kurdish activists at Gezi, such as Sırrı Süreyya Önder, who ran as HDP’s mayoral candidate for Istanbul in March 2014.<sup>22</sup> The government–PKK talks have possibly progressed too far for a sudden U-turn and eruption of violence (as happened in 2011–12). Key agencies of the state such as the intelligence service and the armed forces have turned from blockers to stakeholders. A law was passed in June giving a legal basis for the ongoing peace talks. Yet the end is not in sight.

### Foreign policy

If there is a word to describe the present state of Turkey’s foreign policy it is “vulnerability”. Instead of changing countries and regions around its borders in its own image, Turkey is now on the defensive as instability spreads around its borders. The deadlock in Syria not only pushed Ankara into the Sunni camp but also raised the spectre of violence spilling over into its territory. The deadly bomb attacks at the border town of Reyhanlı in May 2013, which some attribute to the regime in Damascus while others to its radical Islamist foes, were a sobering reminder of Turkey’s vulnerability.<sup>23</sup> So too was the capture of the Turkish diplomatic personnel, including a consul, after Mosul fell to the radical jihadis from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on 10 June.

The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iranian president and the interim deal with the P5+1 also devalued Turkey’s role as a natural go-between.<sup>24</sup> The military coup in Egypt in August removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power. In fact, Turkey’s only remaining regional ally of strategic value is the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq. But reaching out to Erbil, for example by allowing oil and gas to flow freely into Turkey, invariably strains already difficult ties with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. Ankara is trying to keep a pragmatic line, with the AKP’s deputy chairman Hüseyin Çelik conceding recently that Turkey would not object if the KRG declared unilaterally independence.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have exposed Turkey’s dependence on Russia. Ankara has watched with displeasure the changes in the territorial *status quo*, in military balances in the Black Sea, and the worsening plight of the Crimean Tatars, but it could do little unilaterally to counteract Moscow. Like many EU member

states, Turkey remains dependent on Russian gas supplies (approximately 60 percent of the overall volume), while its tourism and construction sectors thrive on business with Russia.<sup>26</sup> The main threat at this point is avoiding harm to its economic interests that might be caused by toughening US and EU sanctions (though in the short term, sanctions will lead to the inflow of capital to Turkey, alleviating the current account deficit problem).

Turkish policy is about limiting the damage of decisions taken elsewhere rather than exercising some sort of leverage on either the West or Moscow. There is also a grudge in Ankara against the EU for inserting Ukraine into a zero-sum game with the Vilnius Summit and unduly provoking Russia. Turkey, in other words, is picking up the pieces in a crisis it did not cause. Ukraine is used to make a point to the US, too: “You have only yourselves to blame. Putin drew strength by your reluctance to check him in Syria.”<sup>27</sup> In many ways, the country has fallen back to its strategic posture of the 1990s when it saw multiple risks and threats originating from the security vacuum created by the Cold War’s end. The key task ahead for Turkey’s leadership is to restore balance and insulate the country from turmoil coming from neighbouring countries.

However, as elsewhere, domestic politics often trumps strategic thinking. Erdoğan himself handles foreign policy primarily as a tool in the war he wages at home. The coup in Egypt turned into an argument against Gezi. He reminded everyone that the battle cry of the putschists in Cairo – “Democracy is not (only) the ballot box” – was commonly used against him inside Turkey, most tellingly by Gül during Gezi.<sup>28</sup> The Alawi base of the Assad regime in Syria turned into a weapon against Turkey’s Alevis, which are mostly supporters of the CHP. Foreign policy has been instrumentalised by Erdoğan’s opponents, too: recordings of top government officials ostensibly discussing a plot to provoke a military intervention into Syria were leaked before the local elections in March. The election cycle has only amplified the effects of this “outside-in” dynamic. The end result for Turkey’s allies in the West is that plans for a strategic partnership aimed at pooling resources and co-ordinating foreign policies is constantly held hostage to the country’s volatile internal politics and Erdoğan’s leadership.

<sup>26</sup> In 2013, natural gas imports from Russia accounted for 29.6 billion m<sup>3</sup>, slightly down from 27.03 billion m<sup>3</sup> in 2012. See Gazprom Export, “Turkey”, available at <http://www.gazpromexport.com/en/partners/turkey/>. In 2013, the number of Russian tourists to Turkey surpassed 4 million, a 26 percent increase since 2012, when visitors from Russia became the single largest group to come to Turkey. See “Turkey, Russia Sign Tourism Action Plan”, *Turkish Weekly*, 17 March 2014, available at <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/164562/turkey-russia-sign-tourism-action-plan.html>; since 1990, Turkish contractors have won projects worth USD 50 billion across Russia, lately in Sochi. Russian state-owned company Rosatom is building Turkey’s first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu near the Mediterranean port of Mersin. See Fehim Taştekin, “Turkish pragmatism at Sochi Olympics”, *Al-Monitor*, 9 February 2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/turkey-olympics-caucasus-sochi-russia-relations-tourism.html#>.

<sup>27</sup> That might be an overstatement but clearly Turkey’s setbacks, in Ukraine, Syria, or elsewhere, have to do with a larger collective failure of the Western alliance as much as its own quest for strategic autonomy. See Şaban Kardaş, “Apocalyptic Death of Turkish Foreign Policy in 2013?”, On Turkey, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, 16 January 2014, available at [http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files\\_mf/1389898210Kardas\\_ApocalypticDeath\\_Jan14.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1389898210Kardas_ApocalypticDeath_Jan14.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> “Gül’den Gezi Parkı açıklaması: Demokrasi sadece seçim değildir mesaj alınmıştır” (Gezi Park statement by Gül: the message “democracy is not only elections” has been received), Akşam, 3 June 2013, available at <http://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/cumhurbaskani-gul-demokrasi-sadece-secim-degildir-mesaj-alinmistir-haber-212133>.

<sup>22</sup> Overall, Kurdish activists were part of the Gezi protests but kept a low profile. Furthermore, sociological data shows that 71 percent of BDP voters thought the government was at fault in the 17 December corruption scandal. See MetroPOLL, January 2014, available at <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiyenin-nabzi-ocak-2014-yolsuzluk-ve-cemaat-hukumet-tartismalari>.

<sup>23</sup> Tülin Daloğlu, “Reyhanlı Worst Terror Attack Turkey has Witnessed”, *Al-Monitor*, 12 May 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/reghanli-bombing-turkey-syria-policy.html>.

<sup>24</sup> The 17 December corruption scandal was linked to Iranian gold deposited in Turkey in contravention of the international sanctions.

<sup>25</sup> “Çelik signals Turkey to welcome independent Kurdish state in Iraq”, *Today’s Zaman*, 29 June 2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-351625-celik-signals-turkey-to-welcome-independent-kurdish-state-in-iraq.html>.

## *A long-term game*

These days, Turkey and the EU have little time for one another: Europe is tied up with its own crisis and Ukraine; Turkey is preoccupied with its never-ending domestic dramas. There is no point being nostalgic for the glory days of 1999–2005 when Turkey and the EU shared the same script. What the EU and its member states could and should do instead is fend off future crises putting in jeopardy already advanced relations with Turkey. Erdoğan's illiberal politics, the polarised domestic scene, economic turbulence, and violence next to Turkish borders create a risk of Brussels and Ankara drifting even further apart. Europe should work hard to avoid that.

The most obvious possibility is to give a fresh boost to accession talks, even as the final destination (membership or close association) remains unclear. After François Hollande took over as French president and France lifted its veto, the European Council decided to open a new chapter (Regional Policy). A month later, Ankara and Brussels signed a long-delayed Readmission Agreement, which might lead, in three years, to the abolition of visas. Member states are now debating whether to open two more chapters: judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23), and justice and home affairs (Chapter 24).<sup>29</sup> Those in favour think that the European Commission should have a greater say on high-profile political subjects such as the independence and impartiality of the Turkish judiciary as well as police standards.<sup>30</sup>

Brussels will be given an opportunity to hold to account Turkish authorities, and back their domestic critics, should it take a chance on Chapters 23 and 24. The visa-liberalisation roadmap adds to its ability to condition policies and legislation in the area of public order, border security, asylum etc. Lifting visas is an incentive and it can play into the hands of the EU. Cyprus, which has long played spoiler in accession talks, might have a positive impact this time round. If ongoing reunification talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots progress, Nicosia would have a reason to unblock additional chapters such as Energy (the British government, among others, supports the idea).<sup>31</sup> This is a clear win-win, now that energy security has come on top of the policy agenda and gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean offer prospects for diversification.<sup>32</sup>

The EU should manage expectations rather than being starry-eyed. It could recover its leverage and press for rule-of-law reforms only if it commits to Turkey's accession. It is not

happening because of the known divisions in the European Council but also because of Ankara's change of heart. In other words, opening "political" chapters will not be a game changer in Turkey's domestic arena as long as the AKP does not own the process. There are also risks in relation to the visa roadmap. Turkey may end up meeting criteria and complying with EU demands, only to be blocked by EU interior ministers. As EU watchers in Turkey acknowledge, the anti-enlargement mood across Europe and the success of the far right in the latest European elections spells trouble. Should the deal get unstuck, Turkey and the EU would easily fall back into the usual blame game.

The EU should try to avoid this vicious circle. Under the worst-case scenario, the EU would grow increasingly critical as Erdoğan grabs more power and rams through decisions in disregard of the opposition. But, perversely, angry rhetoric in European capitals empowers the Turkish leader to rally public opinion behind the flag and conjure up images of external threats. Instead of taking on Erdoğan, Europe should work around him by engaging the future cabinet. The gathering economic storm could underscore the value of pragmatic co-operation: the EU continues to account for about 80 percent of FDI inflows into Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkey matters for Europe's security and energy supplies. European leaders should therefore identify reformers and modernisers within the AKP and work to deepen economic and social interdependence. They should also keep the door open to the three opposition parties and facilitate dialogue at a time of polarisation.

In short, Europe has to play a long-term game with Turkey. There have been many twists and turns in relations between the EU and Turkey. Moments of crisis and stalemate have always been followed by periods of convergence. The EU will never be out of the picture, but the current leadership in Turkey sees no reason to re-engage fully. Their motives are understandable. But this leaves plenty of room for pragmatic collaboration in various policy areas while waiting for the next generation of leaders on both sides who might take new ambitious steps to rekindle the relationship once more.

<sup>29</sup> See European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2014, especially component 37 (Bilateral relations with Turkey), available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2014/wider/37>.

<sup>30</sup> See Independent Commission on Turkey, "Turkey in Europe: The Imperative for Change", 7 April 2014, available at <http://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/>.

<sup>31</sup> A new round of reunification talks started in February 2014 after a two-year suspension. They followed the 2013 banking crisis in the south as well as the advent to power of President Nicos Anastasiades, who had supported the 2004 reunification referendum. See International Crisis Group, *Divided Cyprus: Coming to Terms with an Imperfect Reality*, 14 March 2014, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/cyprus/229-divided-cyprus-coming-to-terms-on-an-imperfect-reality.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> According to the US Energy Information Agency (EIA), Cyprus's Aphrodite field has some 198 billion m<sup>3</sup> in proven reserves of natural gas. Next door, Israel has 283 billion m<sup>3</sup>. See EIA, Eastern Mediterranean Region, 15 August 2013, available at [http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Eastern\\_Mediterranean/eastern-mediterranean.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Eastern_Mediterranean/eastern-mediterranean.pdf).

## About the author

*Dimitar Bechev* is a Senior Policy Fellow and Head of ECFR's Sofia office. He is also affiliated with South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX), St Antony's College, Oxford. In 2006–2010, he was a Research Fellow at Oxford University's European Studies Centre and a visiting professor at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo. He has published widely on the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies as well as on the politics and modern history of the Balkans. He is the author of *Constructing South East Europe: the Politics of Balkan Regional Cooperation* (Basingstoke, 2011). His publications for ECFR include *What Does Turkey Think?* (2011) and *The periphery of the periphery: The Western Balkans and the euro crisis* (2012).

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank to Nathalie Tocci, Albert Rohan, Kerem Öktem, and Karabekir Akkoyunlu for commenting on earlier drafts of the brief. Special thanks to Krassimir Yankov for providing research assistance.

## ABOUT ECFR

The **European Council on Foreign Relations** (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy.

ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- **A pan-European Council.** ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU's member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR's activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Martti Ahtisaari and Mabel van Oranje.
- **A physical presence in the main EU member states.** ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- **A distinctive research and policy development process.** ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to advance its objectives through innovative projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR's activities include primary research, publication of policy reports, private meetings and public debates, 'friends of ECFR' gatherings in EU capitals and outreach to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions.

[www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu)

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors.

Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations

© ECFR July 2014.

ISBN: 978-1-910118-08-5

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR),  
35 Old Queen Street, London,  
SW1H 9JA, United Kingdom

[london@ecfr.eu](mailto:london@ecfr.eu)