



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### Europe: It's Decision Time on Turkey

by Dr. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 438, April 3, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** European countries, concerned about Turkey's swing towards authoritarianism, are not allowing political campaigns by AKP members on their soil, a decision that has rankled the Turkish ruling party. Ankara's relations with Europe have deteriorated for other reasons as well: the support Europe allegedly gives the PKK, its reluctance to acknowledge the alleged responsibility of FGM for the coup attempt in July 2016, and the refugee deal. As the gaps widen between Turkey and Europe, it might be better for both sides if Europe made up its mind about Turkish admission to the EU.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is eager to pass a referendum, scheduled for April 16, which would enhance Turkish presidential power. He stated a few days ago that once the EU decides whether or not to accept Turkey as a member, Ankara's foreign relations will be clarified – a statement with implications regarding the flow of refugees into Europe.

Erdoğan became Turkey's first president elected by popular vote in 2014, after having served three terms as prime minister. He hopes to create an empowered executive presidency that he claims will ensure a more stable and effective administration. In the process, however, it will give him unchecked power.

The executive presidency would replace the existing parliamentary system of government, abolish the office of prime minister, and raise the number of seats in parliament from 550 to 600. It would also change the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors. (An attempt to amend the constitution was pushed in 2011 by the Turkish opposition, but it was not until January 2016 that Parliament approved the 18-article constitutional change with a 339-142 vote.)

Under the proposed new system, the president would stay in office until 2029. This can be accomplished if Erdoğan is able to persuade voters that the parliament will in fact have stronger oversight under the new system, a point he is making assiduously during the campaign.

The AKP passed the bill with the support of MHP MPs. The opposition, namely CHP and the Kurds, fears that if the new system is approved, the limits between the ruling party and the state will blur and a dictatorship will prevail in Turkey. The president would be allowed to issue decrees while retaining ties to his political party. Should this occur, the voice of the opposition will decrease dramatically and possibly be silenced altogether.

If the referendum passes, Turkey will hold general and presidential elections in November 2019, and the proposed powers will be granted to the president elected. European countries are highly apprehensive about those powers, as they view them as putting Turkey on a path to authoritarianism.

Turkey's relationship with Europe has been fraying for some time. Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Switzerland have refused to allow Turkish parliamentarians to speak in favor of the referendum among the Turkish diaspora in Europe. In addition, Erdoğan is determined to bring the death penalty back after the referendum, a move European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has warned would be a "red line" in Ankara's stalled bid for membership in the EU. Other examples of tensions include Geneva's decision in 2016 not to close an exhibition featuring a photo that linked Erdoğan to the death of a protester, and Erdoğan's lawsuit against a German television host for having allegedly mocked him on his program.

Further straining relations is the significant matter of the cost of migration. Europe promised Turkey three billion euros and visa-free access to Europe for Turkish citizens in exchange for help with the migrant crisis. Last July, Erdoğan claimed the EU had not provided the funds, and he has repeatedly threatened to make Europe "pay the bill" – presumably by reopening the floodgates for the estimated 3 million Syrians now marooned on Turkish soil.

From a European perspective, it is not only authoritarianism inside Turkey that worries them, but also authoritarianism intruding itself into their own countries. Newspapers have reported allegations of Erdoğan supporters spying on Turkish citizens in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and other European countries. The Swiss foreign minister told his Turkish counterpart that before the referendum, Switzerland would "rigorously investigate" any illegal spying by Ankara on expatriate Turks.

The main target of this spying is the Kurdish minority, but any anti-AKP activist might find himself on the list. The Kurdish issue is an old dispute between Turkey and Europe, with Erdoğan criticizing Europe for aiding terrorism by supporting Kurdish militants. An example of European tolerance of pro-Kurdish, anti-Erdoğan activity was recent Kurdish protests against Erdoğan in Germany and Switzerland. At the Swiss protest, a call to assassinate Erdoğan was hoisted on a placard without repercussions.

But Kurds are not the only target of Turkish government spying. In February, German police raided the apartments of four imams suspected of spying for Turkey's government on followers of US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, accused by Ankara of organizing the failed coup last July. The Gülen issue still plays a critical role in Turkey's foreign policy. Europe has not halted FGM institutions, it has given asylum to Turkish army deserters, and it has refused to grant that the FGM was behind the coup. (A week ago, Erdoğan's spokesman said that Berlin supports the group behind the coup attempt; the Germans said there is no proof that the FGM was behind the coup.)

Even if Europe's concern over human rights and free speech is genuine, one should not forget that it was Brussels that signaled that it would hold publication of a highly critical report on Turkey's free speech record until after the Turkish general election of November 2015. It did this to avoid sabotaging Erdoğan's (the AKP's) chances, as the EU was scrambling to keep Ankara on board with a plan to stem migration.

Tense relations with Europe are only just beginning. It is possible that within a few years, Turkey's candidacy for the EU will be officially suspended. If this happens, it would be dangerous for Turkey in political, cultural, and economic terms, as it is still institutionally connected with, and dependent on, Europe. But as Erdoğan said: it would be much better for both sides if Europe made up its mind.

*Dr. Efrat Aviv is a lecturer in the Dept. of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. She is the author of Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Turkey: From Ottoman Rule to AKP (Routledge 2017).*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family