



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Turkey: Europe's "Angry Bird"

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Since 2004, Turkey has descended from winning accession talks with the EU to the "sick man of European democracy." President Erdoğan, in his efforts to consolidate his conservative and nationalist voters, continues to fan fears of real or fabricated enemies, with particular emphasis on "Christian crusaders." Few Turks (or Kurds) appear to care about Ankara's disturbing and ever-worsening democratic deficit. Twenty-first century Turkey is behaving like the country described decades ago by a Turkish philosopher: "[It] is a ship heading east. Those aboard think they are heading west, but they are just running west on a ship sailing east."

In December 2013, the worst-ever corruption scandal in Turkish history erupted onto social media, implicating the country's top leaders, their family members, and their business cronies. A scant three months later, a puzzling 43.3% of Turks voted for then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) during the country's first nationwide election. In August 2014, eight months after this massive scandal had been exposed and gone uninvestigated, 51.5% of Turks voted to elect Erdoğan president of the republic.

Two years later, in March 2016, a study by Transparency International Turkey revealed that 42% of Turks' votes would not be swayed by allegations of corruption directed at political parties. Turkey was not just "too big and too poor" to join the European Union (EU). It was also "too different."

Slightly over 12 years after achieving EU accession status, when Erdoğan promised "modernism, civilization, meaningful human rights and freedoms," Turkey suffered the worst decline in freedoms among all the world's 196 countries in 2016. The Washington-based Freedom House's "Freedom in the

World” report showed on January 31, 2017 that Turkey’s aggregate score declined by 15 points, although its status as “partly free” remained unchanged.

This, surely, was not the country “Turkey optimists” in the West had expected to see when they fanned euphemism after euphemism that “Muslim but modern” Turkey would function as a bridge between Islamic and western civilization. The hope was that its supreme democratic credentials would inspire Muslim nations in the Middle East to embrace democracy in turn.

But Turkey, ruled by Islamists disguised as “pro-western democrats,” would take an entirely different course. It brings to mind the reflection, several decades ago, by little-known Turkish philosopher Celal Yaliniz (the “Bearded” Celal), who said: “Turkey is a ship heading east. Those aboard think they are heading west, but they are just running west on a ship sailing east.” It was not just those aboard, but also those in the western hemisphere optimistically watching the ship who were wrong.

In 2016, an average 5.6 people a day were murdered in Turkey, excluding terror victims. The number of prisoners rose from fewer than 50,000 in 2010 to nearly 160,000 in 2014. The number of legal proceedings for sexual abuse of minors went from 2,164 in 2006 to 16,917 in 2015. As of 2016, Turkish law enforcement and judicial authorities had 20 million proceedings of criminal and legal disputes in a country of 79 million people.

According to a UN report released in March 2017, 2,000 people were killed in Turkey’s overwhelmingly Kurdish southeast in the 15 months after the collapse of a ceasefire in 2015. The report documented killings, disappearances, and instances of torture, and said that between 350,000 and 500,000 people had been displaced by fighting between July 2015 and December 2016. In response, Ankara simply condemned the report.

Yet opinion polls suggest that Erdoğan’s popularity hovers around 50%, much higher than that of any other Turkish politician. The AKP remains one of the two political parties for which Turkey’s Kurds tend to vote; the other is the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, or HDP. In the November 2015 parliamentary elections, the Kurdish vote (in southeastern Turkey) was split between AKP and HDP.

Erdoğan’s unchallenged popularity among Turks and Kurds can be explained several ways. To begin with, there is empirical and scientific evidence that few Turks or Kurds care very much about Ankara’s disturbing and worsening democratic deficit.

A good deal of research exists demonstrating that less educated Turks tend to vote AKP. Turks on average have 6.51 years of schooling, with 45 of the

country's 81 provinces scoring below that poor average. Qualitatively, the Turkish education system has been significantly Islamized. Erdoğan boasts that the number of imam school students under his governments rose from a mere 60,000 in 2002, when the AKP first came to power, to 1.2 million today.

Research on the Turks' social and cultural profile, too, points to a fundamental difference between Turkish and European values. For instance, IKSU, a Turkish arts foundation, found in February 2017 that around 70% of Turks had never participated in any cultural or arts event. The study, based on data from research companies GfK and Ipsos, also found that some 85% of Turks said their favorite culture/arts activity was "watching TV." But the difference is not just about culture.

Ninety-four percent of Turks said they had never had a holiday abroad, and 45% percent said they had never had a holiday inside Turkey. But 71% claimed to perform all religious duties. Intriguingly, 57% of women said a husband's permission is a must for women to work, and 60% of Turks believe media should be censored.

Against this backdrop, and in a notoriously xenophobic country (every Turk learns at school that "A Turk's only friend is another Turk"), President Erdoğan keeps doing what he does best: fanning fears of real and fabricated enemies in order to sustain his popular support. Most recently, he singled out a "fascist Nazi remnant" in Europe, reminding the increasingly Islamist/nationalist Turks of the Christian crusaders. A few weeks ago, Erdoğan vowed to mobilize the Islamic world against "euro-fascism."

"It is very unfortunate that Turkey's redefinition of identity has become its weakest link in terms of its relations with the West," wrote Ünal Çeviköz, a former Turkish ambassador. "It is also sad that Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU, as well as its relations with the Council of Europe, if not with NATO, also seem to be affected with a perception of this weakening."

Erdoğan's uninterrupted rule since 2002 and his love affair with the "average Turk" have Islamized Turkey's social, cultural, and political fiber and deflated Europe's erstwhile naïve optimism about the country. The Turks' newfound passion for their leader, and his promises of a return to their glorious Ottoman past, have vindicated Celal's diagnosis of a ship with a Crescent and Star flag sailing east with a crew thinking it is sailing west.

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