

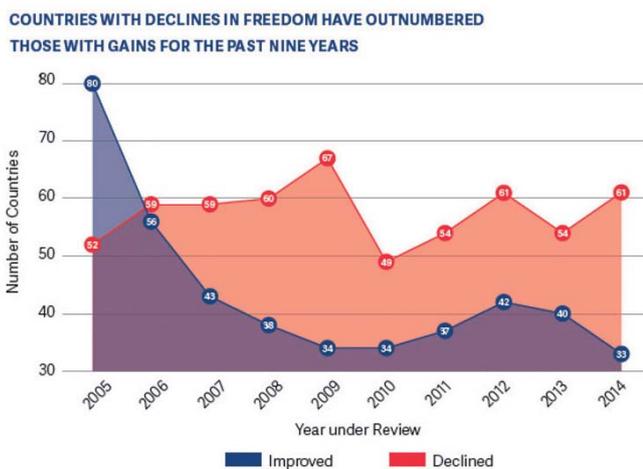
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Turkey in the changing world; what to expect in 2016

There is good reason for pessimism when considering the state of the world today, despite all the apparent progress we have been going through we do not see this translating into real life.

The world is not in a good state. In the foreword of Amnesty International's report for 2014-2015, the introduction reports the period must be seen as an ultimate low point from which we can only rise up.¹ But the following year 2015-2016 portrays a much more pessimistic situation with state level violation of Human Rights all over the world. Examples are many but among the most serious ones are; war crimes being committed in at least 19 countries, torture and ill treatment in at least 122 countries, 60 million displaced people...² The number of countries with declining democratic standards has risen dramatically over the last 9 years, as seen in the graphic below.³



The performance of democracy is poor, civil society is under threat, the media is censored in many countries. This applies to European Union member countries and even liberal democracies like the USA in some respects. The authoritarian attitudes of politicians, even within the EU such as Poland and Hungary, are having serious implications in terms of international relations.⁴

There are growing risks of crises and conflicts all around the world. In 2014, there were 40 armed conflicts were active in 27 locations worldwide, representing an increase of 18% when compared to the 34 conflicts reported in 2013. This is also the highest number of conflicts reported since 1999.⁵ The nature of these conflicts however demonstrates well the chan-

ging trends in the nature of international relations. Large-scale interstate conflicts have declined. Only one was active in 2014, the conflict between India and Pakistan, which led to fewer than 50 fatalities. On the other hand, the trend toward international conflicts is still on the rise, with 33% - the highest recorded since the post World War II period.⁶

There are of course various risk factors which have contributed to these trends. However the outlook in this regard doesn't seem very promising either. Despite COP21, global warming continues to be a great concern. January 2016 figures were well above the average, marking the highest measured since records began 137 years ago.⁷ The risks associated with global warming are not as visible as in other crises but in the near future they are predicted to increase problems for all countries. IPCC puts forward a clear correlation between the future implications of climate change and several issues like armed conflicts, food security, migration and geopolitics.⁸ The estimated number of people that are projected to be displaced will reach 150 million by 2050, according to some predictions.⁹ Some also argue that global warming is partly responsible for the Arab Spring.¹⁰ In particular, the phenomenon known as "agflation" (inflation resulting from agricultural produce price increases) is an interesting factor to observe before the outbreak of war in Syria.¹¹

The structural crises inherent to capitalism complete the picture. While the USA is about to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, the EU still has not managed a full recovery. Especially issues like Greece's financial situation and the future of the Euro have complicated the picture. There is a slowdown of trade in Japan and a slowdown in China's growth which are affecting the global markets. The radical fall in oil prices are also complicating international relations with implications such as Russia becoming increasingly aggressive and the Iran deal opposed by many other countries in the region.

However the trend in the USA is making matters difficult for emerging countries like Turkey. As the Federal Reserve starts to increase its interest rate, this in turn leads to less liquidity for emerging countries like Turkey in particular. On the other hand, while there have been fears pertaining to China's

growth, especially when it comes to its military ambitions, similar fears have started to emerge with regard to its fall in growth rate.¹²

In its 2016 Economic Outlook report, the IMF lists “a general slowdown in emerging market economies, China’s rebalancing, lower commodity prices, and the gradual exit from extraordinarily accommodative monetary conditions in the United States” as determining factors for the world economy, and as has become evident, they are all quite imminent.¹³ The slowdown in trade is still a concern for many as stated in the IMF report “Some five years after the global financial crisis, global GDP is about 4.5 percent below what it would have been had post-crisis growth rates been equivalent to the pre-crisis long-term average”.¹⁴

The territorial claims of China in its region is also contributing to these challenges¹⁵ along with North Korea’s inexplicable situation with regard to the missile launches.¹⁶

Turkey in this global context

Actually Turkey represents a good example of how a crystallization of all these pessimistic scenarios can occur.

Taking into consideration the wave of reform after the 2001 crisis, and adding to this the EU membership talks opening in 2005, Turkey made incredible progress in terms of its democratic and economic development over a number of years. But for the last 7-8 years this trend has been reversed due to several factors and this experience is well worth observing when we consider the real challenges of today’s world.

Located at the very center of critical conflicts in the Middle East, bordering Syria, on the corner of the Ukraine and within the zone of Russian influence, Turkey is in the middle of all the hottest crises that exist today and inevitably everything that is happening has implications for Turkey’s interior affairs.

If we consider the country’s record of positive change to be the result of the Europeanization of Turkish Foreign Policy as seen by many, looking at how Turkey and EU relate to each other might be significant, especially at the moment.¹⁷ Membership of the EU has been seen as the most critical issue for the democratization and development of Turkey. This is especially true of the first years of the AKP’s term,

with the pursuit of a more peaceful foreign policy and better relations with the transatlantic system.

In addition, it is possible to witness a change in Turkey’s foreign policy towards its Middle Eastern neighbors from a hard power approach to one that also utilizes soft power instruments.¹⁸ TİKA (Turkish Agency of International Cooperation and Development) has been strengthened with the delivery of aid to imminent crisis points around Turkey such as the Syrian Civil War and while the development aid of Turkey comprised about 85 million USD in 2002, this amount reached 3 billion 591 million USD in 2014, according to figures from TİKA’S website and confirmed by OECD, ranking Turkey as the 4th biggest donor in 2014 after the USA, EU and UK.¹⁹ Along with TİKA the so called Yunus Emre Cultural Centers that serve as Turkish culture centers similar to the Instituts Français, or Goethe Institute in their most known form, constitute contact points in various countries and emphasize the importance of cultural interaction and cultural representation in foreign policy and bilateral relations.²⁰

As Kaya&Tecmen suggests that Turkey wants to be a middle power but there are discrepancies between the ways in which the ruling party (AKP) and pro-Europeans perceive the way forward for Turkey becoming a regional player - on the one hand, the ideal of the Pax-Ottomana, and on the other hand, empowerment via an alignment with Europe.²¹

Developments since 2010 have shown that the politics of Turkey has been shaped more or less by the views expressed above rather than lining up with the EU and Turkey’s traditional allies. Turkey wanted to be a game changer by testing its capabilities in the context of a regional war that is, in fact, shaking the whole of Europe and the World right now, faced with the obligation to host around more than 2,5 millions refugees.²²

Of course there have been a lot more other factors shaping the relationship between the EU and Turkey. The EU has paid little attention towards Turkey as internal concerns within the Union have prevailed and serious debates have been ongoing, with the economic crisis in Greece and the Brexit issue also being debated. Turkey on its side, has also been deeply preoccupied with its home affairs, debating a change in the political system, consolidating more power in the hands of a highly controversial president, the Kurdish conflict with a small pause for peace talks and social movements leading to a high polarization of Turkish Society.

But now with the so called imminent refugee crisis in the EU, the relationship between the EU and Turkey has been highlighted by many leaders and taken out of the refrigerator it's been stored in. EU intentions came at a time when Turkey's polity was also looking for an exit from its complicated situation in the international arena and from the not so shiny economical climate prevailing up until 2010. A closer look at the reasons behind this thawing in relations and willingness to explore possibilities for the near future could be an important factor in shaping these relations, especially with regard to policy-makers on adopting the proper approach.

A bitter anniversary; 2015:

2015 was a critical year that marked 10 years of EU candidacy status. It also marked the relaunch of the vicious debate concerning the nature of Turkey's membership. With the EU already having discussions within its membership about differentiated levels of integration, Turkey could not escape this, constituting as it does, one of the biggest pieces to swallow and digest for a Union that is the subject of heated debate. At this time, Turkey had to come to terms with discussions around open-ended membership talks, customs union without membership and even a "privileged partnership", the concept put forward by the Merkel and Sarkozy duo at that time. Even though Turkey has appeared on the international stage at events like the G20 and those promoting further values such as women's empowerment with the introduction of W20 for the first time, it is still disappointing to see these tools having limited effect on its own policies, as seen with the controversy of ranking 130 out of 145 on the Global Gender Gap Index.²³

2015 was also an important year for Turkey as it experienced two consecutive elections after the first one could not reach a majority for the AKP to govern, taking the country to a second tour. During this process there was also a breakdown in the peace process that had lasted for 2 years and had actually worked in favor of the AKP by guaranteeing nationalist votes. This was of most significance to the Kurdish political movement in Turkey which has been squeezed in between terrorist groups such as the PKK and the Turkish state, since they were forced to choose a camp. It finally resulted in the loss of votes for the HDP, the main political party relying on Kurdish votes in the second tour of the elections. The continuous postponing of a resolution to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey's southeastern area has now been further complicated by the new twist in the Syrian conflict, as one of the very important

components in the fight against ISIS is carried out by the PYD which entertains close relations with the PKK. This constitutes a breakdown in Turkey's relations with almost the entire world, confirmed by the UN Security Council decision on 16th of February, which managed once more to reunite all countries against the shelling of PYD targets - including China, Russia and the USA. Turkey failed to get onto the Security Council in 2014 the way it had in 2008, demonstrating a significant fall of votes in its favor. This is in line with the concept of "precious loneliness" as mentioned by Erdoğan when criticizing the UN System and defending Turkey's idealist foreign policy.²⁴ However one should not forget how fast the dynamics of the Middle East can change and that political expediency requires a willingness to adapt. That's why not meddling into Middle Eastern politics has been seen as a refuge for Turkish foreign policy at the expense of avoiding relations with the region as a trend for the last few years.

Foreign policy failures:

Turkish foreign policy has gone through a period of idealism with no strong background in terms of power shifts but mainly from a desire for a political ideology that has proved very costly under Davutoğlu who has shaped the whole of Turkey's foreign policy since the time he began his term as a respected minister of foreign affairs at his term in Erdoğan's cabinet.

The good and ambitious start with a policy of so called "zero problems with neighbours" didn't pan out well, setting Turkey at loggerheads with all its neighbours. Armenian relations did not improve, with Iran the conflict with Syria has always been ongoing. The relationship with Iraq has never reached a stable position, with the Iraqi central government more recently making threatening demands for Turkey to withdraw its soldiers from Northern Iraq that Turkey claims to deploy for military training reasons Kurdish peshmerga of Northern Iraq.²⁵ Not to mention the tensions with Greece that still remain unsolved, overshadowed by the past - most importantly Cyprus and the refugees.

The attempt to take advantage of the Arab spring to be a regional player, especially its close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, didn't pay off well and relations with Egypt and Tunis didn't improve while some assets have been lost with regard to Turkish business investments in the region. So the soft policy tools of trade and cultural ties have also been jeopardised.

However this reversal in foreign policy has not only seen a return to old historical conflicts but has also

created a shift with regards to Turkey's allies. Traditionally, since the foundation of the Republic, Turkey has been keenly sidelining with the Transatlantic alliance - except for one special case; Cyprus intervention.²⁶ Being a member of NATO and ally of the US with accession hopes to EU has been an enduring trend.

On the other hand, a recent political shift is worth observing, since Turkey's efforts to acquire Chinese missiles despite NATO being vocal in its opposition, is a significant development. Improved relations with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, taking direct sides by creating a military base in Qatar and collaborating with Saudi Arabia on military bases (the first non-NATO country to send out its planes from an Incirlik airbase) are signs of Turkey's increasing shift to a different understanding of foreign policy. There have been signs that a rupture might be possible, with Erdoğan even mentioning membership of the Shanghai 5 as an alternative to the EU, during this friendly phase with Putin's Russia.²⁷

Unprecedented developments in the past year have, of course, pushed Turkey to reconsider its position towards the EU. The disagreement over Syria with Russia escalating to a level where a Russian plane was shut down, the fight against ISIS and refugee problems are among the most important ones.

Turkey and Israel have been negotiating an agreement to restore diplomatic relations which were cut off in 2010 after an Israeli naval raid on the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* ship which was seeking to break Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. If one factor of the rapprochement process reflects the changing security dynamics in the Middle East, especially in Syria, pushing Israel and Turkey to a closer cooperation, the second one would be a energy deal.²⁸

In the light of these developments, a more likely scenario would be the cancellation of Chinese missile deals, reconciliation starting with Israel, improved cooperation with NATO, and efforts to work more closely with the USA and EU despite disagreement on certain issues like YPG.

3 important perspectives for 2016 to observe

One can state 3 main areas that will be most decisive for both Turkey and EU in this framework, and for the moment only one of them seems to have a positive outlook.

Cyprus

The stalemate in Cyprus that continued since 1974 was very close to being solved in 2004 with the so

called Anna plan which was designed to unite the country prior to the admission of Cyprus to the EU. In the referendum despite 67% of favorable votes from the Turkish side, 76% of Greek Cypriots voted against it and that was the moment when the Cyprus conflict became an EU problem by bringing in an unsolved issue.²⁹

Of course this has radically impacted on the nature of relations, as the EU requires the application of the Ankara agreement's rule to all member countries while Turkey doesn't recognize Cyprus and is not willing to get into a relationship unless the negotiations are completed. This has led to the blocking of 6 Chapters unilaterally by Cyprus in the accession talks with Turkey, thus causing another controversy.³⁰

Since then tension has been on the rise at various periods, especially with regard to Cyprus's efforts to exploit the use of natural gas. But for the first time since 2004 we might be a lot closer to a real solution.

1. Political conjuncture is quite promising in both parts of Cyprus, with the new Turkish president who is a pro-unification person seen as a catalyst³¹, daring to take on Turkish opposition despite strong dependency. The same signs are also coming from Cyprus seeking to diversify its regional ties, especially after the financial crisis that also impacted its economy.

2. Turkey is willing to get closer to the EU and having already meddled with Middle Eastern politics doesn't seem likely to block any talks as long as its interests are respected. Despite criticism from the leaders of Greece, Cyprus and Israel, the door is left open to Turkey's new policy towards this new geopolitical bloc.³² The first time visit of the Foreign Minister of Northern Cyprus in this context was an act that was not warmly welcomed by Greek Cypriots, but can be considered as an important signal for the involvement of Turkey in the resolution of the conflicts.³³

3. To continue to a third point, and a very important point in the agenda is the fact that the most cost efficient way of delivering Israeli gas to the Turkish Market seems to be via the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. This could be an important synergy for the export of gas found in the Aphrodite reserve with a volume that is not viable enough to support a pipeline project in the context of the low commodity prices of today.^{34 35}

Alignment with the EU

Even though a very first and separate chapter is needed for Cyprus it is not possible of course to separate it from relations between Turkey, the EU and the world.

The main focus of EU & Turkish relations in 2016 seems to be constituted by the Refugee Crisis. And in order to solve this issue Merkel is pursuing a very proactive policy complementing even the point above with regard to Cyprus by pushing not only Cyprus but also Greece to reach an agreement on blocked chapters.^{36 37 38}

Actually both sides have reasons to reignite the long stalling accession talks. Refugee issues have added more fuel to the crises of EU countries that have been going through difficult times internally. Austerity measures made conservatism and extreme right parties win a lot of popularity, accentuated with a touch of Islamophobia as a reaction to ISIS actions. The EU's reactions show a greater solidarity when it comes to the financial crisis in Greece and other austerity measures but also on the repartition of refugees with quotas. Finally Brexit has been on the agenda for a very long time - another issue calling the Union into question. Merkel has recognised the need to take an action and has taken advantage of her popularity at home compared to other leaders to do so. She has been the one leading negotiations with Turkey on refugee issues, along with the European Commission.³⁹

From Turkey's side its much more critical to decide on the future of the country. It is hard to predict whether the implications of Syrian refugees are seriously considered. But there is one thing that most of the actors could agree on: Turkey has lost its shine since 2010. A period that reversed democratic evolution, bringing a change in the constitution and continuing with the negative effects of the Arab Spring on the „soft-power“ policy Turkey aspired to in the region. The shooting of Russian military jet was a milestone. It has finally led Turkey to a point where it is at odds with both Russia and the United States at the same time.

This is why the EU offer has come at a good time to meet the needs of both parties, even though it doesn't represent a great win for either of them. But one important aspect where the EU has come under criticism is the fact that the values that must predominate the accession negotiations are being neglected in favour of the gains in the negotiations with

regard to refugees. While the EU has some chance of enforcing a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem, and continue promoting democracy by enforcing conditionality, it is revealed that even accession reports have been postponed following demands from the Turkish authorities, leading to a loss of hope in liberal and pro-EU circles in Turkey.^{40 41}

Turkey's domestic politics

The domestic politics in Turkey could be in one of its worst stages under constant pressure from foreign policy developments and the high polarization of society on almost every matter that is subject to public debate.

There will be two main areas to observe in Turkish domestic politics in 2016. The first one is the change in the constitution or the so called presidential regime debates. The second one is the tension associated with the increasing polarization of society which will be more concretely seen in the public debates realting to the first point and lastly but most importantly to the Kurdish problem.

1. Presidential Regime or Democratic Governance:

Erdoğan's willingness to push for a presidential regime is interpreted as a move towards a further consolidation of power into his own hands by many observers. This is especially true of the foreign press covering Turkey who are critical about Turkey's role and positioning in terms of its ties with the West that has not been witnessed before.⁴²

At the moment, according to the numbers present in the parliament a change in the constitution requires a coalition with at least one of the three other political parties that are all against a presidential change.⁴³ Despite efforts to present the context as a new constitution, the substance of this discussion is of course the presidential regime, and there are signs that Turkey might face a new parliamentary election or referendum now that the main opposition party CHP has stated that it will not negotiate anything related to a regime change in this direction. As already put forward, Erdoğan and the AKP have shown themselves remarkably adept at spinning security concerns into political support. This was not clear to see after the voting turnout spiked after June to the November parliamentary elections with 9% giving back absolute majority to the AKP.⁴⁴

However there is a great opposition to the political moves, both from inside and outside Turkey. The researches carried out show the level of polarization in Turkish society. The people identify themselves

more and more with their political engagement and they declare negativity towards the “other side” to the point that they do not want their kids to marry the opposition’s kids (83,4%), they do not want to do business with them (78,4%), nor do they want to be their neighbours (76%).⁴⁵

Any problem that Turkey is experiencing cannot be solved though without the addressing challenges of democratization including the very pertinent Kurdish problem.

2. The Kurdish problem

Turkey is a good example of how postponing the resolution of a country’s problems is not good for long term results. When the framework of a peaceful agreement was open it was not possible to resume the peace talks with the PKK.

In 2005 Erdoğan was hailed as the first leader to acknowledge the Kurdish question.⁴⁶ That stance was strengthened by the introduction of optional Kurdish lessons at schools, opening of a public TV channel broadcasting in Kurdish and similar moves since the beginning of this acceptance. However after the 2015 events, the government has declared a unilateral approach towards resolution of Kurdish issue with Davutoğlu’s so called Mardin plan, that is seen by many a vain effort not having counterparts and doomed to fail.⁴⁷

Now Syrian branch of PKK called as PYD is the most successful army on the ground battling against ISIS making them indispensable for the coalition. This is on the others side against all game setting in the AKP’s Syria policy also having implications in the interior affairs.

The harsh reaction of the state against PKK’s organizations in some cities of Southeastern Anatolia has come under the spotlight of the international arena because of the mainly civilian casualties.

Erdoğan was really close to a peaceful settlement, then suddenly changed direction most likely because of public reaction. This has stopped the ceasefire, changing the result of the ballot box again in favour of the ruling party.

The change in the constitution and even a regime change towards a presidential regime is again on Turkey’s agenda. It is an important time for Kurdish politicians to also be involved but it is difficult to bring this about, given the ongoing tension and military conflicts in the southeastern borders. On the other hand, Kurdish politicians are losing their momentum given the fact that they stayed in between the PKK and State authorities, a very

difficult situation to manage peace talks especially in a context like this.

Conclusions

It won’t be wrong to say that the relationship between Turkey and EU will be driven mainly by their own interests rather than shared common values. The actual setting that has just been described clearly shows the seriousness of the situation.

But this serious situation is creating a window of opportunity for Turkey in which EU can be a convincing choice if the following steps are taken:

First of all the EU should play a more active and supporting role in creating a solution for the island of Cyprus. This will not only help to revitalize accession talks with Turkey, but also normalize an anomaly created by the EU itself by accepting Cyprus without resolving its disputes.

Secondly, it would be wiser to improve coordination in terms of Foreign Policy. For Turkey this could only be achieved by pushing again for a normalization of Kurdish problems and going back to peace talks that might have also positive implications for relations with the PYD in Syria, also putting an end to the misunderstandings with the USA. Otherwise Turkey might be left out of solutions a very undesirable situation given the importance of the bordering regions.

Thirdly, the EU has its role to play in this, supporting Turkey in the refugee crisis open heartedly would not only contribute to the well being of Turkey but also stop the uncontrolled flux of refugees. But doing this by closing its eyes to what is really happening with the democratization in Turkey would not be the solution. The EU must not simply focus its interest in cutting down the number of refugees approaching its borders, but in contributing to a more stable regional balance with a truly democratic and strong country by its side. This is why accountability and transparency in the management of this cooperation package is indispensable and requires engagement from all stakeholders such as international organizations, Civil Society, etc.

And of course finally, Turks must do their homework, and collaborate more with the international community and march towards a more democratic way that embodies more international democratic values and human rights.

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