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Lest we offend...

As President Erdogan purges opponents at home and abroad, Europe's leaders look on from the sidelines

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has played rough and won: on 16 April, he achieved victory in a historic referendum that granted the irascible leader sweeping new powers.

Citizens across Europe are shocked at how Turkey, a candidate for EU membership, is breaking with its democratic traditions. But EU politicians seem strangely unmoved. After a meeting between EU foreign ministers and their Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in Malta, the EU announced it would not only respect the result of the referendum, but that it also wanted to continue with accession negotiations.

The backscratching continues

It seems the EU is willing to turn a blind eye to autocracy for the sake of preserving its refugee deal with Turkey and its own economic interests. EU representatives seem to assume Erdogan will moderate his stance once he is comfortably settled on the dictatorial throne. The bloc's Foreign Policy chief Frederica Mogherini, for instance, hopes "the Turkish government [will adhere to] European standards in making these intended amendments to the state". Meanwhile, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has suggested granting visa-free travel to all those Turkish citizens who voted against increasing the president's powers – a totally unworkable proposal. In other words, he wants to allow Turkish intellectuals, artists and journalists unrestricted entry into the EU, whilst banning Erdogan's supporters. He is playing straight into Ankara's hands, fuelling Erdogan's assertions of EU bias against Turks.

For Turkish democrats and 'no' voters, these are scary times. Dozens of people calling for an investigation into allegations of electoral fraud have been arrested. And for good measure, Turkish politicians are no longer accepting any future European court judgements on the matter.

Since the referendum, Erdogan has used several speeches to outline his

objectives. First up: the death penalty, which he has vowed to reinstate "without hesitation", subject to parliamentary approval. Erdogan clearly wants to keep the ultra-nationalists on-side up to the Turkish presidential election in 2019. He is also planning new offensives against groups deemed terror organisations in Syria. He's not talking about Al-Qaida or so-called Islamic State (IS) but rather the Syrian-Kurdish PYD, which is fighting those two groups. He has already ordered the Turkish army to set up battle stations on the Turkish-Syrian border and strike PYD positions in Syria. Cross-border clashes are an everyday occurrence. The US and Russia have stationed their own armoured vehicles in front of Kurdish positions in an attempt to prevent things getting out of hand, but tensions are still rising.

Draconian measures

Inside Turkey, the Erdogan regime is mowing down anything that stands in its way, including the law. At the end of April, more than a thousand people were arrested for suspected links to terrorist groups, often with scant evidence. Rumours of torture abound. 32 detainees reportedly took their own lives in the last month.

Erdogan wants to reinstate discipline in his own AKP party after he takes over the leadership on 25 May. Observers expect to see a fresh round of purges in the party and affiliated media. Last week, a number of TV and radio stations previously associated with the Gülen movement were sold to the pro-Erdogan Turkuvaz Media Group. Erdogan already has significant influence over the judiciary. According to local news reports, 90 percent of the 1,341 lawyers appointed as judges after the referendum belong to the AKP.

Meanwhile, Turkey's economy is languishing, with declining export and tourism revenues and rising inflation.

The Turkish regime is also flexing its muscles abroad. In early May two Turkish nationals - a headteacher and a businessman - were arrested in Malaysia. Both men, known to be linked to the Gülen movement said to be behind last year's attempted coup, are now facing possible deportation back to Turkey. Last October another three people were handed to Turkish agents in Malaysia. Phil Robertson, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia director, called on the Malaysian government not to extradite the detainees to Turkey, saying there was "little doubt" they would be subject to "torture and an unfair trial". Two of the men are currently imprisoned in Ancara, while the third man's fate is unknown.

Thanks to the referendum, whoever becomes president in 2019 will

exercise almost unlimited power. Needless to say, Erdogan will be in the running. If he wins, he will be able to fulfil his dream of freeing Turkey from the West and restoring it to its former glory as the leading nation of the Islamic world.

This vision is hardly compatible with the "European standards" Mogherini hopes he will adhere to. Brussels' policy of wilful ignorance cannot turn out well. A more effective strategy would be to freeze accession negotiations, as proposed by German Green Party leader Cem Özdemir. Brussels, he said, should show that the ball is squarely in Erdogan's court when it comes to cutting ties with the EU: "Let history hold him responsible. He is looking for a fight. We should wait calmly and patiently at the negotiating table." And Özdemir is sure of one thing: "One day a democratic Turkey will come back to the table. And when it does, the Europeans should be ready".



Cem Sey
Berlin

Cem Sey is a freelance journalist who writes for German and international publications, including *Deutsche Welle* and the *Tageszeitung*.