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EU "may well" put Turkey membership bid on hold

Turkey expert Felix Schmidt talks about how the country's recent referendum will affect its relationship with the EU

On Sunday 16th April, voters in Turkey approved a draft constitution that gives President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sweeping new powers. He will become head of the executive as well as head of state, and is allowed to retain his party membership. The role of prime minister will be scrapped, and the President will be able to appoint ministers and senior judges. Meanwhile, parliament will lose its right to scrutinise ministers. Felix Schmidt, of the FES' Istanbul office, spoke to Hannes Alpen about the controversial referendum's consequences for Europe.

The Turkish people narrowly voted to change their constitution, handing significantly more power to President Erdogan. Opposition parties are now claiming the vote was not conducted fairly and want to challenge the result. Could the outcome of the election still change?

The Opposition have already appealed to the Turkish electoral commission, but even they don't believe the result will change significantly. The final decision lies with the electoral commission, and it's highly unlikely they'd dispute their own judgement. We can also assume that that the current "yes" result will be approved, even if the figures change by a fraction of a percentage point in the case of a successful appeal.

What impact will the referendum have on Turkey's attempts to apply for EU membership?

By voting for constitutional change, Turkey has taken a big step back from the European Union. The EU won't be able to ignore the Venice Commission's scathing assessment of the new constitution's deficiencies – it says Turkey is on the "on the road to an autocracy and a one-person regime". Nor can it ignore the OSCE and other

independent observers who say the election process wasn't fair or rigorous. This kind of criticism makes it less and less likely that the accession process will carry on apace.

Would the EU consider breaking off or at least freezing membership negotiations?

There are already many voices within the European and national parliaments saying negotiations with Turkey cannot carry on as before, especially considering the inflammatory statements Erdogan made against his European neighbours on the campaign trail. There is increasing cross-party consensus on this issue. The EU is unlikely to break off relations with Turkey altogether at this point, it may well put membership talks on hold. Breaking off diplomatic ties would damage both the EU and Turkey's interests. But in the medium-term, the EU and Turkey may well need to 'redefine' their relationship. Even if membership negotiations carry on as before, there is no way all the member states would ratify any conclusion to those negotiations.

Turkey's relations with individual EU member states – Germany and the Netherlands in particular – became particularly tense in the run-up to the referendum. Many observers judged Turkey's arrest of the Turkish-German journalist Deniz Yücel to be politically motivated. Is the situation likely to improve now the referendum is over?

Unfortunately we're unlikely to see any improvement in the near future. Straight after the referendum President Erdogan announced he plans to reintroduce the death penalty. So Turkey's next major clash with Europe has already been set in motion. We can't expect a quick resolution to the Deniz Yücel case either. Erdogan's already indicated that, so long as he remains president, Yücel won't be released.

NATO wants stable partner countries, yet one of them – Turkey – is divided as never before. Can we expect a change in the alliance's relationship with Turkey?

Turkey will not be kicked out of NATO in the near future, even if that's what some politicians in Europe are demanding. It would be ill-advised politically to give up on this position of potential influence when there's no need. Putin would be rubbing his hands with joy! For the moment, all sides have an interest in making sure this security alliance can lend a certain amount of stability in what is a particularly violent region.



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