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Turkey: End of the affair?

There's still time to stop Ankara turning its back on the West

The recent series of provocations from the Turkish political leadership has started a heated debate across Europe. Some have begun demanding harsher measures for dealing with Ankara – and are, in so doing, embroiling themselves in a heated, but fruitless squabble with President Tecep Tayyip Erdoğan. While the media and various observers support this stance, politicians in Europe must not be drawn into a tit-for-tat with the Turkish leader. Because a wrestling match with Western governments is exactly what Erdoğan wants, until he can secure the 16 April referendum on a new constitution that would hand him significantly more power.

Still, a civilised debate on how to deal with Turkey can only be a good thing. Whatever the outcome of the referendum, it would be naïve to assume Ankara's regular tantrums will stop after the vote. Hurling abuse is one of Erdoğan's enduring tactics, so the cacophony of insults against the West in general – and the EU in particular – will continue unabated.

There are several reasons why we are where we are. On the one hand, Erdoğan has manoeuvred himself into a political dead end. He cannot back out unscathed. When allegations of corruption surfaced against the President and his inner circle in late 2013, he waged war with his own civil servants, targeting anyone in a position to investigate. Judges and police officers lost their jobs; some ended up in prison.

No way out

Since then, Erdoğan has been systematically dismantling the constitutional order, so a return to the *status quo ante* would mean his personal demise. Having gone down this path, the EU with all its constitutional mechanisms puts the President in a dangerous position. Were Erdoğan to lose power, his unscrupulous retinue would most likely end up behind bars. For the leader, there's now only one option: full steam ahead, remaining at the helm and discarding or discrediting all remaining vestiges of the rule of law. Thanks to the accession process, the

EU has gained significant influence in Turkey. That puts it directly in the line of fire.

For years now, Erdoğan has been steadily replacing the leadership of the ruling Party of Justice and Development (AKP). Anyone pushing Turkey towards full EU membership has been silenced. Today, the entire party leadership is united behind Erdogan. Politically, they are all as anti-West as he is, and are simply trying to buy enough time to line up an alternative partner, before cutting the (strong) ties between Turkey and the West. Some even dream of open confrontation with the West, but have been held back thus far by the complex economic integration of their country into the Western framework – something that can't be exchanged for another model overnight.

Another indication that the course of conflict will continue is Erdoğan's partnership with the Turkish Nationalist Grey Wolves. The paramilitary group will continue to lobby him on foreign policy, demanding he distance himself even further from the West.

Nonetheless, Ankara has no plans to reject the West completely and become a fully paid-up Kremlin ally – at least not yet. Whilst Moscow may delight in an internal conflict within NATO, it would never accept Turkey as an equal partner – and Ankara knows it. The Arab world, too, whose loyalty Erdoğan long hoped to secure, is now moving in quite the opposite direction, leaving Turkey bereft of real friends in the Near and Middle East – with the possible exception of Qatar.

The referendum result will not change this state of affairs. A win for Erdoğan would strengthen his position and encourage him to become even more provocative on the international stage. But even if he fails on 16 April, he won't let go of power anytime soon. If anything, the political struggle inside Turkey will intensify, and relations with Europe will remain as frosty as they currently are.

Laying down the law

So what can Europe afford to risk? NATO and the EU accession process remain the West's greatest Trump cards against Turkey: the former because it provides the country's security, the latter for giving Turkey its economic model. The West cannot force Turkey to remain within these structures, but neither should it cast them out. It should apply a firmer hand: Erdoğan is not a man who responds to hints and nudges. Moscow had the right idea when, after Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian aircraft on the Syrian border, Vladimir Putin used a combination of economic sanctions and diplomacy to bring Erdoğan to heel.

For Brussels, it means freezing (without actually questioning) the accession process until Ankara can prove rule of law has returned to Turkey. The EU should not negotiate improvements to the customs union or visa conditions until such proof is forthcoming. Within NATO, there should be no discussion on terminating the alliance's management of refugee movements in the Aegean.

The Council of Europe, a staunch defender of the basic principles of democracy and human rights, is another important factor: Turkey has been a member since 1949. After the 1980 military coup, Turkey was threatened with suspension – the German government of the day blocked the move. Today, Turkish constitutional democracy has been undermined to an even greater extent, so a suspension is be a matter for serious consideration.

The West should also consider how and to what extent Ankara can be excluded from NATO military planning without denying it the alliance's overall support. Erdoğan should not be allowed to conduct his risky, unpredictable foreign policy whilst hiding behind NATO.

Unless Erdoğan faces heavy pressure from the West, he will not take the smallest step back. Without Western governments limiting their cooperation with Turkey, Ankara's will continue to push its anti-Western policy unabated. Clearly though, Turkey remains part of the West. If the connection is severed, it will be Ankara that does the cutting.

Going down this path will also come at a cost to the West. There needs to be a Plan B when it comes to the current refugee deal and to the Incirlik military base, which is being used in the campaign against Islamic State (IS). Erdoğan could also create new problems in Cyprus or provoke conflict in the Aegean, and the EU will need to stand united in both areas.

EU governments "must end anti-Turkish discrimination"

It is also clear that Erdoğan intends to garner support from Turkish expats in Europe. Here, however, his chances of success are low, as the overwhelming majority of Turkish communities in Europe will not countenance being used as diplomatic footballs. In turn, European governments will no longer be able to sweep discrimination against these communities under the carpet. Turkish immigrants are European citizens and their integration into the societies they live in must be a

matter of priority.

For the Turkish opposition, all this will be a bitter pill to swallow. Opposition politicians warn that isolating Turkey will only help Erdoğan, but Moscow has already shown that this line of argument is flawed.

The wider Turkish population is aware that their leaders are driving the country into a position of isolation. Even some of Erdoğan's own voters are confused. To calm their fears, he has occasionally resorted to bluster about "the value of loneliness" in international relations. If Europe wants to help Turkey change course, it will need to demonstrate that isolationism, in fact, is of no value at all.



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