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Turkey's division between East and West

In recent years, President Erdogan has galvanised anti-Western sentiment in Turkey. Now, he's changed course — but the public is reluctant to follow

Ever since the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia war, the Turkish government under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been busy trying to restore its alliance with the West after a period of discord following its acquisition of Russian S-400 missiles. Appearing at the NATO summit in Brussels and hosting a number of Western leaders in Ankara since the invasion, Erdogan seems eager to go back to business as usual with Turkey's Western allies. However, the Turkish public is not as fast in readjusting its position vis-à-vis the West as its president who had been galvanising anti-Westernism up until very recently.

A poll conducted by Metropoll in January shows that Russia and China have outdone the US and the EU in winning the sympathy of ordinary Turks. While 37.5 per cent of respondents say that Turkey should prioritise the EU and the US in its foreign affairs 39.4 per cent prefer Russia and China. Even after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, according to a Metropoll survey in March, 29.5 per cent of Turks still think that relations with Russia and China should be given priority. It seems that, in recent years, an eastern foreign policy orientation for Turkey has gained significant acceptance in a NATO member and EU candidate country. The poll also reveals that not only the voters of Erdogan's AKP but also the base of opposition parties favour Russia and China.

Western scepticism surfaces even in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. A recent survey reveals that only 33.7 per cent of Turks think Russia is responsible for the war in Ukraine while 48.3 per cent say that it is the responsibility of the US and NATO.

Anti-Westernism in Turkey

These figures reflect a deep-rooted anti-Westernism among the Turkish people that has been stirred under the rule of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). The scope of anti-Westernism raises questions about the prospect of Turkey as an ally of the West in the long run. Given the prevailing scepticism toward the West and emerging sympathy for Russia and China, a rehabilitation of the alliance with the West may be too optimistic – even in a post-Erdogan Turkey.

The growing anti-Westernism in Turkey can also be attributed to the successful efforts of a minor but resourceful Eurasianist clique.

While the Erdogan government presented the West as the mother of all evils, plotting against Turkey's economy, sovereignty, and security until very recently, the impact of the AKP's anti-Western narratives could have remained limited if it had not established a propaganda network controlling all communication channels except social media. The Turkish public has never been exposed to such continuous and orchestrated narratives about how the West plotted against Turkey. The AKP has built a discursive hegemony effectively delegitimising any expression of favourable views of the West.

As the masses were manipulated by Erdogan's propaganda machine, opposition parties were also trapped to echo the prevailing negative perception of the West, effectively normalising and further popularising the AKP's anti-Western narrative.

The power of Eurasianism

Besides, the growing anti-Westernism in Turkey can also be attributed to the successful efforts of a minor but resourceful Eurasianist clique, especially among the retired military officers, with whom the Erdogan government has formed a political alliance after the 2016 coup attempt.

Since the late 1990s, they have been consistently calling for a strategic move of abandoning the West and embracing the East. Invigorated by Turkey's growing strategic ties with Russia and China and as a partner of the ruling party, the Eurasianists gained a new position of influence in the public debate on the question of Turkey's direction towards the West or the East. Often appearing on government-controlled media, the Eurasianists have turned the anti-Western rhetoric of the ruling party into favourable views towards Russia and China.

While the anti-Western narratives dominated the public debate, there has been no significant political actor, ideological or social group that would defend Turkey's traditional Western vocation.

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Turkish leftists have always been critical towards the West and understood it as the hotbed of imperialism, a position that helped spread and further legitimise the AKP's anti-Western stand, especially among the secularists. The secularists, in turn, with their leftist and rightist variants, have developed a strong distaste for the West despite their apparently Western lifestyle. They tend to believe that the Western powers pursued a 'green belt' policy during the Cold War years working together with Islamists throughout the Middle East and more recently have supported moderate Islamists including the AKP in Turkey.

Finally, there's a widespread belief among the Turks that Western states and organisations have been aiding the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and its offspring, the People's Defense Units (YPG),) in Syria. This has spurred and cemented anti-Westernism across the political spectrum.

Can cooperation with the West flourish?

Despite President Erdogan's very recent U-turn, it is extremely rare to see public advocacy for a Western outlook in Turkey's foreign policy. Those who remain committed to Turkey's traditional Western-oriented foreign policy represent a silent group without political and intellectual representation or the institutional backing of the military, once a staunch defender of Turkey's Western direction. Public debates continue to be dominated by anti-Western and Eurasianist personalities and ideas.

As the Ukrainian crisis evolves, the Turkish president makes overtures to Turkey's Western allies. But the anti-Westernism that he has fostered among the Turkish people remains an obstacle to usher a new era of cooperation.



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