



September 2016

Newsletter 69

WHITHER TURKEY? A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS

For a tyrant, his biggest achievement is when he manages to convince his people he's not a tyrant.

Joseph Bonkowski

This isn't the first time EFTA has devoted a newsletter to developments in Turkey. But this summer's events mean we have to revert to the matter with grave concern. One has to acknowledge that both internally and externally the situation in Turkey is extremely complex and shifting. That makes it difficult to assess just what lies behind this, but there is no harm in trying.

After the coup attempt in the night of 15th July, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan embarked on a purge on an unprecedented scale: 60,000 civil servants were sacked (1500 university professors, 15,200 teachers, 2755 judges, more than half of all army generals), 50,000 people had their passports taken away; 45 newspapers and 16 TV channels, 3 press agencies, 23 radio stations and 29 publishing houses were shut down. The authorities also have 120 leaders and managers of big companies, many NGO's and umpteen intellectuals and writers in their sights. The latest arrest was that of female author Asli Erdogan, a leading figure of contemporary Turkish literature.

All have been charged with or are suspected of somehow supporting or of belonging to networks ("Hizmet" – "service" in Turkish) of imam Fethullah Gülen, whom President Erdogan accuses of fomenting the failed coup. Like him, all these people are potential "terrorists" therefor. As the gigantic rally (at least 1 mn people, 5 mn according to the organisers) of 7th August at Yernikapi near Ankara showed, he has managed to convince a large part of Turkish public opinion of this. They had already accepted that F. Gülen had help from the CIA who allegedly assisted him in taking refuge in the US in 1999.

Immediately, the European Union and the US expressed their concern about the unprecedented scope of this purge, as well as their surprise that so many people suspected of being closely or loosely associated with the coup were able to be identified so quickly. Many Western leaders saw this repression, this witch hunt as Erdogan himself calls it, as a new stage in the man's authoritarian drift.

He in turn very soon complained about the lack of support from the West, though all had condemned the coup attempt in the hours following it and called for the rule of law and democracy to be respected. True, in her first statement Chancellor Merkel did, for instance, refrain from siding with R.T. Erdogan by name, expressing her support for the Turkish people and their democratic institutions instead.

On the other hand President Erdogan welcomed President Putin's personal and immediate support, given over the phone. Quite a few sensational declarations and speeches have followed since that night of 15th July ("the West has sided with the coup leaders and terrorists"), particularly that of 7th August. Hence one may well ask whether Turkey is actually turning its back on the West and teaming up with Russia. Is this a strategic about-turn in Turkey's geopolitics? Or is the country gearing up to play a leading role in the Middle East? And most of all, what is the impact of these events and of these domestic and external policy decisions on relations between the EU and Turkey or on the implementation of the agreement of 18th March last re the harbouring of Syrian and Iraqi refugees?

In seeking to reply to these questions we need to consider recent positions adopted by Turkey, as dictated by its President:

- The ever more marked nationalist-Sunni Islamist stance vis-à-vis its predominantly Shia neighbours (Iran, but also Iraq) won't make a rapprochement between them any easier.
- Its stance regarding the future of Syria: contrary to Russia's attitude, so far anyway, as the main ally, along with Iran, of Bashar-el-Assad, President Erdogan is supporting Syrian opposition, and he firmly condemns, in his speeches in any case, crimes perpetrated by Bashar-el-Assad's government forces against Syrians who oppose him.
- Its stance vis-à-vis the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS or Daesh): as opposed to the American-led coalition, Turkey, in its fight against Daesh has since 2014 adopted a most ambiguous attitude towards the jihadis, mainly to stop Kurdish bastions being thrown up at Turkey's gates (two Turkish journalists, now serving 5 years in prison, had at the start of 2014 produced evidence of Turkish armed support for Islamist groups in Syria; in October 2014 the Turkish army stood and watched as jihadis took the Kurdish town of Kobane, on the Turkish-Syrian border; the Russians have published satellite images of convoys of tanker-lorries at the Turkish-Syrian border and accused "President Erdogan and his family of involvement in this illegal oil trade"). The Russians share this ambiguity, as they have often been criticised for directing their airstrikes at opponents of the Assad regime rather than at jihadis. When its troops were sent into Syria to liberate Jarablos, a border town, again one may wonder if they wanted to push back Daesh or outmanoeuvre Syrian Kurdish forces, who want to settle West of the Euphrates, thus avoiding any progress in the establishing of an autonomous Kurdistan on its borders.
- Till 2013 Americans and Europeans had hoped to see Turkey playing a major role in stabilising the Middle East. But the severe repression after opponents challenged the

plan for the demolition of Gezi Park, that R.T. Erdogan called “a coup attempt” pointed to grave internal dissensions and domestic instability.

- In that same year 2013 the Gülen community/network, which is highly critical of Erdogan’s external policy, became openly dissident and had incriminating documents published that point to widespread corruption of Erdogan and his family and of a number of his ministers. True, this break led Erdogan to sacrifice four of the ministers named in the revelations, but also he had some 15,000 alleged supporters of Gülen within the administration arrested, transferred or sacked (the Hizmet network wields its influence mainly in the education, justice and defence ministries). Erdogan also organised control of the community’s bank (Asya Bank) and of a number of companies and media. So the determination to dismantle imam Gülen’s network doesn’t date back just to the failed putsch of 15th July 2016.
- Relations with the US and NATO: very quickly after the coup attempt President Erdogan complained about the lack of support by President Obama. In an interview with Le Monde on 8th August he said: “I would have hoped American leaders might have spoken out more strongly and have come to Turkey sooner. Alas, it was not to be.” In that same interview, President R.T. Erdogan regretted that the US hadn’t yet responded favourably to his request for the extradition of imam Gülen whom he called “the leader of a terrorist organisation” ...”in spite of the 85 boxes of documents we sent the US” to prove his accusation of instigating the coup attempt. In an attempt to reduce the tension President Obama sent Vice-President Joe Biden to Turkey on 24th August instead of State Secretary John Kerry. Given this deterioration of relations with the US and the visit to “his friend Putin” in St. Petersburg on 9th August, one might be tempted to believe a series of declarations smacking of blackmail, suggesting “that this situation may harm our strategic partnership”. However, as often happens, President Erdogan’s words are immediately qualified by Prime Minister Binali Yildirim : “the US are our strategic partner, not our enemy”. In actual fact Turkey benefits enormously from belonging to NATO, just as NATO relies on this strategic partner and turns a blind eye when it goes adrift.
- Let us bear in mind Turkey’s multilateral bonds with the West: founding member of the UN in 1945, member of NATO since 1952 and of OSCE since 1973. It joined the Council of Europe in August 1949 and became an associated member of the EEC in 1963. Turkey is also a founding member of the OECD in 1960, joined the WTO in 1995 and the G20 in 1999, holding the chair in 2015.
- Relations with the European Union: re membership negotiations and the migration agreement of 18 March 2016, in that same interview with Le Monde of 8th August, President Erdogan stated that, when the coup attempt happened “the West left the Turks to their own devices” and “the Western world acted in contradiction with the values it defends. They must stand together with Turkey that has taken on board their democratic values”. One realises the wide gap between these statements and European analyses of the breadth and the justification of the purges after the coup had failed, as well as the growing split over the membership negotiations. After the 1963 association agreement, official membership negotiations only started in 1999. They resumed in 2006 but are treading water. On 29th April the Commission submitted to Council a draft common negotiating position for the only new chapter

(chapter 33, financial and budgetary provisions) that has been opened after the refugee agreement.

- For a long time the Cyprus issue was the main obstacle to Turkish membership, primarily for Greece and Cyprus. Since 1974 Turkey has occupied 37% of the island in the North and is the only one to recognise the self-proclaimed “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”, whereas it doesn’t recognise the Republic of Cyprus. Only the reunification of the island will remove this major obstacle to accession. The two parties are working on it, but an agreement is hard to find. Even if Greece supports the accession process after their relations have improved and a number of bilateral agreements have been concluded, it wants all conditions to be complied with. One is normalisation with Cyprus and another is fulfilling the accession criteria laid down by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. Apart from the economic, administrative and institutional criteria, there are also the political criteria: stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minorities. Not a done deal in today’s Turkey! If truth be told, a majority of member states have been against Turkish membership for a long time, even forever. France has said it will hold a referendum in case the negotiations produce a proposal to join, knowing full well that a vast majority of French public opinion would vote against. And that would block membership of course. The German authorities have also spoken out against membership a number of times and would prefer reinforced co-operation. Turkey for its part is banking less and less on it happening. In his recent pronouncements, while he claims the EU to be “alone responsible and guilty” for the negotiations stagnating, President Erdogan clearly shows he has but few illusions. It is in this context that he brandishes without hesitation the weapon of reintroduction of the death penalty. All European leaders have quite rightly marked this as a red line (as is compliance with all articles in the EU’s charter of fundamental rights) and if crossed, that would cause negotiations to stop immediately.

As for the readmission agreement and the visa waiver that was promised for Turkish nationals wanting to travel to the EU, the president doesn’t hesitate to threaten “if our demands aren’t met, no more readmissions will be possible”. Now whereas the stream of migrants from Syria and Iraq seems to have almost stopped in June 2016 (47 /day as against 1740 before the agreement), returns from Greece to Turkey and resettlement cases from Turkey into the EU¹ these days only total about 500. So what is the real weight of the threat about migrants travelling to Greece via Turkey?

It is reassuring to see though that while the EU has already committed € 2.155 bn of the € 3 bn for the “refugee facility in Turkey” intended for help to refugees and host communities, it is standing firm regarding compliance with all 72 criteria regarding frontier security and fundamental rights by Turkey before the visa requirement can possibly be lifted. 7 of these criteria still haven’t been met: the issuing of biometric passports, anti-corruption and data protection measures, an agreement with Europol, i.e. the European police co-operation agency, and, most of all, changing Turkish anti-terrorism legislation which is deemed to be too far

¹ See Newsletter n° 64 of April 2016

removed from European standards. The European Parliament and the Commission don't appear about to yield to Turkish blackmail.

Provisional conclusion

In a situation where its President, who's been in power since 2003 either as prime minister or as president, is seen to be drifting more and more towards authoritarianism, Turkey seems no longer to be able, even willing to move closer to the European Union. Indeed, the options taken for settling internal conflicts with the "terrorists" or its external policy stances are causing Turkey to depart from European values, such as free speech and equality between men and women. But also democracy pure and simple as Mr. Erdogan's successive elections don't guarantee it, whatever he may say. Without drawing a parallel, let's remember Hitler was elected in a regular way when he came to power. By the same token, Islamisation of society and of the state is making it more and more difficult to honour one of the founding values of Atatürk's modern Turkey, to wit that of secularism.

Another serious worry is the "sultanisation" of the President who has had a palace with a thousand rooms built (the largest presidential palace in the world, four times the size of Versailles with 300,000m²). On the other hand it seems unlikely Turkey is planning to leave NATO, thus severing its many links with the Western world, in favour of an improbable alliance with Russia and Iran. So what we're probably witnessing is the abandoning of the notion of belonging to the European Union but not a geopolitical revolution. Perhaps the dream President Erdogan is pursuing most actively at the moment is that of having considerable influence in the Middle East.
