

FEATURE Voices

AFTER THE ELECTIONS:

TEN TAKEAWAYS ON TURKEY'S EUROPEAN FUTURE¹

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A little reluctantly, most European leaders called or sent messages to congratulate Erdogan on his victory in the June 24th elections. A few days later, the EU's General Affairs Council stated that Turkey was moving further away from the European Union and that the conditions were not in place to advance the accession negotiations or the modernisation of the Customs Union. They did, though, commit to continue working on subjects such as migration, energy and security. Turkey's reaction was as expected: Europe's attitude was called hypocritical, inconsistent and unfair. Are we moving towards a train wreck or a scenario in which the need to cooperate mitigates the tension? To answer this question, these ten elements must be borne in mind:

- 1. The worst-case scenario has been avoided.** Nobody dared to express it openly but of all the possible post-electoral scenarios one in particular was a nightmare, not only for Turkey but also for its partners and allies: the loser of the elections taking to the streets to challenge the results. Given the country's polarisation, serious incidents would have resulted. The European Union would have been forced to take a stance, placing at risk either its credibility or the continuity of its cooperation with the Turkish authorities.
- 2. Erdogan matters even more.** After these elections the constitutional reform enshrining a presidentialist system comes into force. Decision-making will be even more hierarchical and in the hands of a smaller group of people. Until now, when relations with Erdogan went through rough patches, European leaders and institutions could resort to alternative channels, mainly through the prime minister. This is no longer the case. In the new system this figure disappears, leaving no option other than to talk with the president. The Erdogan factor has always been an important element in relations with Turkey but it will be even more so from now on.
- 3. Crises will arise but there will also be a willingness to keep them under control.** The history of relations between Turkey and the European Union is dotted with crises, and Erdogan's 16 years in power are no exception. Mutual accusations and reproaches are habitual and often made to obtain political gains. Hence, in both Turkey and the EU countries, they have been more frequent when elections approach. To date, ways to lower the tension and redirect the situation have always been found and this will not change. New crises will undoubtedly break out and old wounds may open, but before placing cooperation at risk on matters of security or economic interest, both sides will explore the ways to lower the tension.
- 4. Relations will be emotionally charged.** In Turkey – and this extends beyond Erdogan and his voters – a strong feeling of grievance and discrimination has taken root when people look towards Europe. They feel they are treated as a second-class country and accuse the European Union of not fulfilling its

promises. The supporters of opposition forces also accuse the EU of not doing enough and many feel abandoned. In the European Union the emotion is less strong but some of Erdogan's gestures and speeches have touched nerves. The most notable was the accusation that the Dutch as well as German authorities were "Nazi remnants". There is distrust and resentment on both sides. Gestures, symbols and emotions will continue to be irritants in the coming years.

5. Nationalism has growing influence in Turkey. The main surprise in these elections was the success of the MHP, a far-right Turkish nationalist party. In the parliamentary elections the MHP stood in coalition with the AKP, and their MPs hold the key to the parliamentary majority. The MHP will certainly attempt to influence Turkish politics from a nationalist perspective. The priority will be all topics connected to the Kurdish issue but they may also display a belligerent attitude on sensitive issues, particularly vis-à-vis Turkey's neighbours, including Greece and Cyprus. What remains to be seen is whether they are able to influence debates on foreign policy issues and, even more so, the decisions taken by the government.

6. The economy will be even more important. The Turkish economy is emitting ambivalent signals. On the one hand, with growth figures of over 7%, it shows great dynamism. But on the other, the exchange rate collapsed and doubts are growing about the sustainability of a model that has to resort to the international market for credit due to its low domestic savings level. The global context increases its vulnerability: oil prices, US sanctions on Iran, the end of monetary expansion and generalised doubts about emerging economies. In fact, the fear of an economic crisis breaking out was one of the factors that led Erdogan to call early elections. One aspect these elections won't alter is the fact that the European Union will remain Turkey's main economic partner as well as its main investor. Thus, Turkey will realise that it cannot afford to cause a major crisis with the EU, one that could jeopardise trade and investment links, particularly at a time of increased economic vulnerability. All in all, the economy may end up absorbing the shocks that start in the political arena.

7. Refugees will stay on the agenda. Many Europeans, including heads of state and government, associate Turkey with the migration agenda. It is quite telling that the representative of the EU institutions at Erdogan's inauguration ceremony was Dimitris Avramopoulos, the commissioner in charge of migration. Any decision related to Turkey will be taken with consideration given to whether it compromises collaboration on this issue or not. That is the point of continuity. What could change is that, aware that the EU is feeling vulnerable again, Erdogan may increase his demands. We will also have to pay attention to whether he and his parliamentary partners fulfil their electoral promises to return some of the Syrian refugees that have until now found shelter in Turkey. While Syrians will remain the main focus of attention, the situation of Afghan refugees and the way Turkey deals with them will also become more visible. If the return of refugees – Syrians, Afghans or others – is made involuntarily and to conflict areas, the EU will have to decide whether to openly criticise such actions and deal with possible reprisals as well as listening to Ankara retorting that in this area the EU is in no position to give lessons.

8. The elections remind us that Turkey is more than Erdogan. 52% of voters – or in absolute figures over 26 million people – is a lot. But what about the other 48%? When the EU sets out its policies towards Turkey it must think about the whole country, including that other half. How? Instead of giving up on Turkey, programmes and measures that, for example, allow student exchange or the strengthening of civil society should be maintained or even ramped up, as should issues such as visa facilitation, which can send positive messages to the whole country. The European Union must be able to criticise any decision that, from its point of view, goes against shared values and norms and must invite the Turkish government to do the same. And, above all, it must avoid making a whole country pay for disagreements with the people who govern it or about the way they govern it.

9. Being aware of the cost of divorce might be healthy. The cumulative frustrations on both sides increase the temptation to bang a fist on the table. Erdoğan once suggested the possibility of calling a referendum so that Turkish citizens would be the ones to finalise the accession negotiations. A year ago, the European Parliament asked for the negotiations to be frozen. Austria went further and called for a complete suspension, saying that it was all a diplomatic fiction. Nevertheless, we know very little about the costs of a divorce, amicable or otherwise, or which parts of the bill would be paid by each party. Putting the cost of not collaborating on the table could be a way to help more conciliatory attitudes flourish.

10. There is life beyond accession. Not everyone dares say it, but there is broad consensus that Turkey's integration into the European Union is off the agenda, at least in the short and medium term. Not only because Turkey does not meet the requirements, but also because the European Union is unprepared (and unwilling) to open its doors. The challenge is to find a way to handle relations while containing mutual frustration. In 2012 the European Commission proposed the concept of the "positive agenda". It sought to put the conflictive issues to one side in order to advance where interests and desire to cooperate are shared. This idea remains valid but with three nuances: any offer made to Turkey should not be formulated as a consolation prize; the temptation to fall into a purely transactional rationale must be avoided; and the messages from Brussels and the member states interested in maintaining bilateral cooperation should be as consistent as possible.

In a controversial interview Macron said that his job as president was not as cool as some thought and gave the example of having to speak with Erdoğan every ten days. Over the coming years, European leaders will continually have to pick up the phone to speak with Erdoğan. They will reach out to him to handle the latest crisis or to preserve some crucial area of cooperation. Relations between Turkey and the European Union will continue to oscillate between conflict – more or less theatrical – and cooperation. There will be more frustration and more episodes of tension, but the costs of a full-blown confrontation will remain unaffordable.

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ABOUT FEUTURE

FEUTURE sets out to explore fully different options for further EU-Turkey cooperation in the next decade, including analysis of the challenges and opportunities connected with further integration of Turkey with the EU.

To do so, FEUTURE applies a comprehensive research approach with the following three main objectives:

1. Mapping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of their underlying historical narratives and thematic key drivers.
2. Testing and substantiating the most likely scenario(s) for the future and assessing the implications (challenges and opportunities) these may have on the EU and Turkey, as well as the neighbourhood and the global scene.
3. Drawing policy recommendations for the EU and Turkey on the basis of a strong evidence-based foundation in the future trajectory of EU-Turkey relations.

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