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# Political Changes in Turkey and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations: From Convergence to Conflict?

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## Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the political changes in Turkey since 1999, through a process-tracing exercise for four political drivers -namely democratisation, civil-military relations, the Kurdish question and foreign policy orientation- that unfold these changes under three periods of Turkey’s political history (1999-2002; 2007-2013; 2013-present); and secondly presenting an assessment of which of the three FEUTURE scenarios for Turkey-EU relations—convergence, cooperation or conflict —is the most likely to obtain in the near future on the basis of these drivers. With the ever rising degrees of unpredictability in international relations to the side, the paper argues that the political changes in Turkey during the AKP reign are likely to escalate the already conflict-ridden relationship between Turkey and European Union, but also lays bare the perhaps more important questions of how and why this is likely to be the case.

## Özet

*Bu makale 1999’den bu yana Türkiye’deki siyasi değişimlerin bir analizini, Türkiye’nin siyasi tarihindeki üç dönemde (1999-2002; 2007-2013; 2013’den günümüze) bu değişimleri yansıtan dört siyasi itici gücün, yani demokratikleşme, asker-sivil ilişkileri, Kürt sorunu ve dış politika yöneliminin, süreç takibini yaparak sunmakta; ve ikinci olarak bu itici güçler çerçevesinde Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği ilişkileri için yakınsama, işbirliği ve çatışma olarak tarif edilen üç FEUTURE senaryosundan hangisinin yakın gelecekte daha olası olduğunu değerlendirmektedir. Uluslararası ilişkilerde yükselen belirsizlikler bir yana bırakıldığında, bu makale AKP yönetimi süresince Türkiye’de yaşanan siyasi değişimlerin Türkiye ve Avrupa Birliği arasında hâlihazırda çatışma içeren ilişkileri daha da çatışmacı hale getireceğini iddia etmekte ve bu sürecin nasıl ve neden gerçekleşeceği gibi önemli soruları ortaya*



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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Turkey has been going through a comprehensive political and social transformation. This transformation has had and continues to have a profound impact on Turkey’s relationship with the EU. Also, the EU accession process has played a distinctive role as a tool discursively invoked by key political actors; notably the major political actor of the transformation, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), as a means to facilitate a desired domestic political transformation.

This paper presents an analysis of the political changes in Turkey since 1999, with the specific aim of first identifying the drivers that unfold these changes under three periods of Turkey’s political history and secondly presenting an assessment of which of the three FEUTURE scenarios for Turkey-EU relations—convergence, cooperation or conflict—is the most likely to obtain in the near future on the basis of the drivers identified to be the most salient at the present. With the ever rising degrees of unpredictability in international relations to the side, the paper argues that the political changes in Turkey during the AKP reign are likely to escalate the already conflict-ridden relationship between Turkey and Europe, but also lays bare the perhaps more important questions of how and why this is likely to be the case.

The methodological basis of the paper is a process tracing exercise around four major political areas of change, namely *democratisation, civil-military relations, the Kurdish question and foreign policy*. The descriptive upshot of this exercise is that three distinctive periods emerged as markers of the changes—1999-2007; 2007-2013 and 2013 to present—and that the consequences of these periods of change has been the transformation of Turkey-EU relations from convergence to conflict. More importantly, perhaps, the process tracing has proven instrumental to first “identify novel political and social phenomena and systematically describe them” (Collier, 2011: 824) and then to “gain insight into causal mechanisms” (Collier, 2011: 824) that, in the context of the present paper, are conceived to be the root drivers of the change.

The paper proceeds as follows: After summarising the major political changes in each period, analyses are conducted to (i) first identify the underlying drivers of the change, then (ii) evaluate how the drivers have developed over time, (iii) clarify how and under which circumstances and through which actors they have had an impact on Turkey-EU relations, and then (iv) weighing the current (September 2017) salience of the drivers. The paper concludes with an assessment of which of the three possible FEUTURE scenarios convergence, cooperation and conflict is the most likely to obtain in the 2023 timeframe, with analytical remarks on how and why this is assessed to be the case.



## 2. The Helsinki Turn: Inclusive Democratic Orientation – Multilateral Foreign Policy (1999-2007)

The 1990s in Turkey was characterised by political and economic instability. The coalition government formed by the Democratic Left Party (DSP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and Motherland Party (ANAP) after the April 1999 elections was already destined to face serious political and economic crises, which was to be exacerbated by the Marmara earthquake in August 1999. The government sought the remedy this by concluding a three-year stand-by agreement with IMF and the World Bank in December 1999. In this conjuncture, the EU candidacy granted to Turkey after the Helsinki Summit in December 1999 became instrumental for the coalition government to “foster trust and hope in the society” with an attempt to overcome domestic political crises and to deeper integrate with the world capitalism. Concomitantly, Turkish politics in the period of 1999-2002 focused on the reforms to harmonise with the EU criteria, which would ironically challenge some taboos of Turkish politics such as the Kurdish question and Cyprus problem (Saraçoğlu, 2015: 884). In terms of foreign policy, the Helsinki summit marked a welcome prospect of a European anchor following a decade of uncertainty since the end of the Cold War.

The coalition government immediately started to implement a set of reforms on sensitive political issues (Eralp, 2009: 159) as a part of the political Copenhagen criteria, which were considered to be the main drivers towards further democratisation in Turkey. In this context, the coalition government abolished the death penalty and extended cultural rights to minority groups such as the Kurds; took the first steps to ensure civilian control over the military through changing the nature of the National Security Council decisions and its composition in a way to increase the civilian members; and strengthened the guarantees for human rights and fundamental freedoms, through constitutional amendments in 2001 and adoption of a set of reform packages in 2002. However, the 2000-2001 twin crises of a balance of payments crisis simultaneously with the crisis of the banking sector practically proved the political and economic incapacity of the coalition government and eventually led to the November 2002 general elections.

No doubt, the most important *political change* of the period is the election victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002. Such a critical juncture symbolised with AKP’s coming into power did not only depart from coalition governments that became the major symbol of political and economic instability throughout the 1990s, to a single party government rule, but also and perhaps more importantly, it was the starting point of a long-lasting “political and ideological transformation” (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 873), which would remain uninterrupted for the following at least 15 years of Turkish history.

When it came to the nature of the claimed political line, the AKP identified itself as “democratic, conservative, reformist and modern”, where the emphasis on democracy in the official documents of the party entailed “a vision of Turkey . . . where differences are perceived not as a source of conflict but as richness”, (Coşar and Özman, 2004: 63). Indeed, the AKP invoked the EU process as a signifier of its democratic, reformist and modern aspects, where the Copenhagen Criteria were



referred as “the fulfilment of the freedom of thought and expression, abolishing the obstacles, which limit freedom of enterprise, transparency in government, strengthening of local government” in the AKP’s Election Manifesto of 2002 (Coşar and Özman, 2004: 62-63). While the AKP considered the “EU anchor” as the backbone of political stability, the AKP, having a neoliberal and market-based economic policy orientation, also accepted the “IMF anchor” as the backbone of economic stability in Turkey (Eralp, 2009: 159), which, in turn, was perceived to be functional for enabling Turkey to fulfil the Copenhagen economic criteria (Yalman and Göksel, forthcoming).

For the AKP, the 2002-2007 period represents its efforts to domestically and internationally consolidate its existence as a political power (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 875). While it was trying to balance its domestic relations in an effort to ensure its “legitimacy”, it also successfully instrumentalised the “EU anchor”, as well as its cooperation with the IMF, as a leverage against the domestic forces that would have otherwise curbed its transformation project (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 875). In an attempt to avoid intrusion from Kemalist elites and the military, which perceived the AKP as “a pro-Islamist and fundamentalist political party” (Coşar and Özman, 2004: 65) the AKP’s claim to be a “Conservative Democratic” party enabled them to gain the support of the EU. The main political drivers such as the attempts for democratisation, civil-military relations, the Kurdish question and the foreign policy orientation of the AKP in the period 2002-2007 will be examined in this context.

When the AKP came to power, it did not hesitate to follow up the EU harmonisation process which was already initiated by the DSP-ANAP-MHP Coalition Government. Thus, the moves towards *democratisation* in this period were directly related to Turkey’s EU accession process. The AKP continued to adopt the harmonisation packages, including a series of legal changes to enhance the freedoms of association, expression and press, and minority rights; to fight against torture and ill-treatment, and discrimination; and to make the closure of political parties more difficult. In addition, compared to the previous government, the AKP seemed more receptive to civil society organisations (Göksel and Güneş, 2005: 63). The AKP was receptive not only to the business elites, but also women’s organisations, environmental groups and human rights’ associations who took a part in lobbying for Turkey’s EU accession process (Eralp, 2009: 160) and added weight to the leverage of the EU anchor.

Although the *civil-military relations* in Turkey were brought back on to the agenda within the context of EU’s political conditionality (Güney, 2013: 133) three years before AKP’s election victory, it was the AKP who took on the ownership of the struggle against the political role of the military through a series of legal and institutional changes. For example, in 2003, as a part of the seventh EU Harmonisation Package, the National Security Council (NSC), which was considered to be “the military’s main tool for shaping civilian politics” (Sarıgil, 2007: 41), was redefined as an “advisory/consultative body”; working procedures and the nature of its general secretary was changed; and, parliamentary control over military, especially over its expenditures, was increased (Sarıgil, 2007: 46). In spite of a number of declarations from the military cadres, there was no serious



resistance from the military for the changes towards diminishing its role through changing its inner structuring and working methods in the first half of the 2000s. This was especially due to the intensity of the EU accession process, which was claimed to create a “rhetorical entrapment” for the military (Sarigil, 2007).

In spite of “the role played by the EU as a legitimiser in domestic politics” (Sarigil, 2007: 46), the attempts to diminish the role of military in Turkish politics have also had a domestic context. Owing to a major component of its political discourse that presents the existence of military tutelage as a factor that hinder democratisation in Turkey, the AKP’s moves towards diminishing the political role of military have been one of the factors that created the arguably illusory hopes in Europe that the AKP could serve as an agent of democratic transformation, where the democratic parliamentary regime has been perceived to be under the threat of (military) tutelage (Yalman, 2013: 31). Accordingly, the increasing civilian control over military increased the credibility of Turkey within the context of the EU pre-accession process until the 2007 and served as one of the factors to enhance convergence between the EU and Turkey governed by the AKP.

With regards to the long-lasting *Kurdish issue*, arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK in 1999 marked the end of the so-called “bloody 90’s” and yet another nadir in the cycles of hope and despair the Turkish-Kurdish population have grown accustomed to. However, the nascent pro-EU drive did not only revoke Öcalan’s death penalty, but held out the promise of a new hope. The AKP soon rose to prominence on an appeal to the conservative segment of the Turkish-Kurdish groups, and a promise to break with anti-Kurdish Turkish nationalism of the still politically powerful military and “deep” state actors. As opposed to the Kemalist ideology, the AKP approached the Kurdish population as a cultural/folkloric component of the “nation” which has Sunni cultural commonalities (Saraçoğlu, 2014). State pressure on Kurdish cities was slowly lifted. European institutions played an important role as leverage in this respect. To the Turkish-Kurdish population, the EU was a guarantor of minority rights. To the AKP, the EU was a buttress in its push for religious freedoms and taking on the remaining political power bases of the ethno-nationalist and hard-line secularists of the recent past such as the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the various armed forces. The AKP leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for example, went so far as to open the Kurdish language state TV channel, TRT6, with few words of Kurdish<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the Kurdish issue was a source of convergence between Turkey and the EU during this initial period.

The Helsinki Summit was also a turning point in terms of the *foreign policy* orientation of Turkey. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey was no longer crucial to Europe as a NATO buffer against the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> The Cold War tradition of military guardianship of Turkish politics was no longer condoned, as outlined above. Partly inspired by Turgut Özal’s opening and liberalisation of the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/kurdish-politician-puts-erdogan-tough-spot-82629?amp=1> (accessed 20 July 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Turkey presented itself as a broker of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990’s, but this attempt largely fell on deaf European ears.



Turkish economy to the world, Turkish foreign policy substituted a reactive, status quo orientation along an ethno-national fault-line—e.g. in relation to the Turkic populations of the post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia—for a pro-active expansionary approach soon to be formulated along religious fault-lines.<sup>3</sup> A pro-Western, pro-Israeli foreign policy alignment was substituted for a multilateral approach that included outreach to the MENA countries and the Balkans, as well as the EU. Following the 9/11 terror attacks, Turkey was invoked by the US and Europe as a model country with a non-violent Muslim majority population, and since 2005 Turkey has been a key sponsor of the UN’s “Alliance of Civilizations” attempt to prove Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis wrong. The pro-active multilateralism of the AKP foreign policy of this period placed Turkey as a much needed mediator country and set it onto a path of convergence with the EU.

In sum, this reformist and pro-European drive led to somewhat of a mind-boggle for many in Europe. How could it be that the ostensibly pro-Western, Kemalist-secularists who feared a creeping Islamisation of Turkey came out against the EU? And how could it be that Erdoğan with his staunchly conservative Refah past came out in favour of the EU? Part of the answer to this question will get us to a key driver of the developments of Turkish foreign policy in this and the following periods, the importance of domestic manoeuvring for power, not only in Parliament and Government, but also in relation to historically strong institutions such as the judiciary, the military, the bureaucracy, and even the media landscape and business world. During this period, Turkey was characterised as following in a default manner EU’s neighbourhood policy with soft power instruments. This orientation was particularly reflected in the more positive attitude of Turkey towards the long lasting taboo issues such as the Cyprus and Armenian problems. It is also possible to witness increasing convergence with the EU’s CFSP statements during this period. Many of the changes in Turkey’s EU-related foreign policy of this period are aptly understood in the outlined utility for an ongoing domestic power struggle.

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In general, this period reflects an inclusive democratic orientation and multilateral foreign policy. A series of events make the EU anchor important. On the one hand, a bipartisan support among major political actors can be observed; and on the other hand, business actors, especially after the economic and financial crises of 2000/2001, start to consider EU anchor as crucial. In addition, informal integration through people-to-people contact increases in this period. The political changes and their reflection on the drivers in this period depict a pattern of cooperation with the possibility of convergence in terms of outcomes of the EU-Turkey relations.

<sup>3</sup> This is much debated. For present purposes, see e.g. Keyman, E. Fuat and Gümüşçü, Sebnem (2014) *Democracy, Identity and Foreign Policy in Turkey – Hegemony through Transformation*, Palgrave, and Stein, Aaron (2015) *Turkey’s New Foreign Policy – Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, Routledge.



### 3. “Strong Turkey”: Majoritarian Rule – Unilateral Foreign Policy (2007-2013)

2007 was also a critical juncture in Turkey’s history; and one that triggered a series of political changes in Turkey. The period between 2007 and 2013 was mainly characterised by election victories of the AKP, which consolidated its political power as the governing party; and a series of court cases that were perceived to be instrumental for the AKP to pursue an “aggressive political strategy” in a way to liquidate social and political actors perceived to constitute a threat to AKP’s ideological project (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 928). Early elections in July 2007, the election of Abdullah Gül as the president by the newly elected parliament in August 2007, the adoption of constitutional amendments<sup>4</sup> in October 2007, the AKP winning the closure case against the AKP at the Constitutional Court in 2008, adoption of the constitutional amendments in 2010 and general elections in 2011 were the most striking political changes during this period. They all lead to the political consolidation of the AKP’s hold on political power.

In 2007, the issue of presidency became a nodal point of confrontation between the AKP and secularists. Nomination of Abdullah Gül to presidency by Erdoğan not only generated reactions from the military elites (mainly through what is known as an “e-memorandum”) and the opposition parties, but also gave way to street demonstrations, known as “Republican rallies”, organised in different cities mainly by Kemalist circles against the threat of “sharia” and political Islam. The demonstrations gathered huge masses and were mainly composed of members of non-governmental organisations, political parties, labour unions and professional groups (Balkır, 2007), all critical of the AKP. The presidency crisis led to the early elections in 2007.

In the 2007 elections, the AKP increased its votes from 34% in 2002 to 46.6%. The new parliament composed of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) with 20.9%, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) with 14.3% and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), which by-passed the 10% threshold through nomination of independent candidates and eventually managed to form a parliamentary group with 26 deputies (4,7% of the parliament). Reinforced by its election victory, the AKP’s political discourse started to equate “‘majority’ in parliament with ‘the national will’” and accordingly the AKP denounced any political or social opposition to its political project as “the enemies of the people” (Dinçşahin, 2012: 630). Such an exclusionary discourse paved the way to the crystallisation of societal polarisation that would manifest itself in the confrontation between secularism and political Islam. In addition, Abdullah Gül’s nomination and eventual election as the President in 2007 had been a turning point to ensure internal consolidation of the AKP around Erdoğan. Gül’s presidency, on the one hand, eliminated of a potential rival to Erdoğan within the party, but ensured a president which would work “in harmony with the AKP government”, and on the other

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<sup>4</sup> These constitutional amendment introduced the election of the President by popular vote for a renewable term of five years, the shortening of the government’s term of office from five to four years and the establishment of a quorum of one third for all sessions and decisions of parliament.



hand worked as a mechanism to calm down the opposition to the extent that Gül earned “a reputation for his moderate, democratic and conciliatory attitude towards all segments of society” (Dinçşahin, 2012: 635).

AKP’s increasing power and self-confidence after the 2007 elections also went hand-in-hand with a series of court cases against a heterogeneous group of political and societal forces, which mainly included the members of military, judiciary and media on the one hand, and the Kurdish movement, as well as the left-Kemalist and socialist intellectuals, institutions and organisations, who effectively opposed the AKP on the other (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 928). Ergenekon, Sledgehammer and KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) investigations led to numerous imprisonments, based upon charges of “plotting to overthrow the government and/or engaging in terrorist activity/propaganda” (Saatçioğlu, 2014: 93). The Gülen community, which increased its power within judiciary and the police forces after the AKP rule, allegedly facilitated the court cases, through efficient use of its networks within the state apparatus (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 929). Meanwhile, the closure of the pro-Kurdish DTP by the Constitutional Court in 2009 gave the way to the establishment of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) that would become an important actor in the political arena in the following years.

In addition to the lawsuits, another component of the AKP’s political consolidation on the basis of the “majoritarian” discourse was the realisation of a set of legal and institutional arrangements, especially towards the elimination of the autonomy of the judiciary and its authority over the executive. The constitutional amendments, accepted by a 57.88% yes votes in the 2007 referendum, actually became an instrument for the AKP “to secure political hegemony via establishing executive control over the high judiciary” (Saatçioğlu, 2016: 136), by restructuring the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, which were perceived as “the two other ‘impeders’ of the popular will” that AKP assumed to carry supported by the majority (Dinçşahin, 2012: 637). The package was criticised by opposition parties particularly due to the clauses on judiciary, claiming that the government wanted to seize control of the judiciary, thus undermining secularism and the principle of separation of powers. However, the amorphous characteristics of the amendment package including articles regarding lessening military and bureaucratic tutelage and enhancing the quality of constitutional democracy, enabled the AKP to frame the amendment process around the discourse of democratisation, where the party even could get the support of the liberal intelligentsia and some segments of the left which supported the constitutional amendments with the slogan of “not sufficient but yes” (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 996). It was also interesting to see that the European Commission assessed the constitutional changes as a step in the right direction, since they addressed a number of priorities in the area of the judiciary, fundamental rights and public administration (European Commission, 2010: 8).

The referendum victory of the AKP was repeated in the 2011 general elections, where the AKP got the 49.95% of the votes. CHP with 25.94% and MHP with 12.98% entered the parliament, and BDP



managed to get 36 deputies (6,5% of the parliamentary seats) with the same strategy of nominating independent candidates. The third term of the AKP rule, labelled by the then Prime Minister Erdoğan as “advanced democracy”, further consolidated the AKP’s political power, with emergently authoritarian tendencies (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 947), which would lead to a series of political struggles starting from 2013. Thus, the processes with regards to the main political drivers of democratisation, civil-military relations, the Kurdish question and the foreign policy orientation will be traced below within this context.

The AKP’s concrete steps for *democratisation* in the period of 2007-2013 is considered to be limited to some minor constitutional amendments in 2007, the “democratic opening” process announced by the AKP in 2009 with regards to cultural rights of the Kurdish population and some components of the constitutional amendments of the 2010 (Özer, 2015: 149). During this period of limited reforms, one minor step was the amendment of Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code<sup>5</sup>, which penalised insulting Turkishness and the state and constrained freedom of expression in Turkey, by changing the wording of the article and lowering the upper limit of the penalty in April 2008.

Besides those moves, in this period, the AKP was rather reluctant at implementing the reforms concerning fundamental political freedoms. Notably, freedoms of expression and the press<sup>6</sup> considerably regressed, allegedly “in order to suppress public criticism of its policies and consolidate its rule” (Saatçioğlu, 2014: 93). To the extent that AKP consolidated its political power domestically through elections and political manoeuvres, its need for or dependence on the EU candidacy and the concomitant democratic reforms diminished (Özer, 2015: 155) and it could “pursue the Europeanization agenda with an increased leeway and more selectively” (Saatçioğlu, 2013: 93). Thus, democratisation, which was instrumental for the AKP to ensure its legitimacy in the previous period, slowed down during this period, which can be construed as a transition period from “progress towards backsliding” in the field of democratisation (Özer, 2015: 155).

With the appointment of a new Chief of General Staff in 2006, the *civil-military relations* started to get tense (Güney, 2013: 141), where the military targeted the AKP by assuming the duty of “protecting the fundamental principles of the republic” (Jenkins, 2007: 353) against AKP’s political Islamic tendencies. The parliamentary voting for the president in 2007 triggered a concrete momentum for the military to exercise its political power explicitly, through an “e-memorandum”, where the AKP and a president with AKP background were clearly pointed out as a threat to secularism and the military assumed the role of “absolute guardian of secularism.” However, early general elections in 2007 consolidated the AKP’s political rule and would increase the level of ci-

<sup>5</sup> Turkey’s prominent intellectuals and authors such as Elif Şafak, Orhan Pamuk and Hrant Dink were accused of insulting Turkishness under this article.

<sup>6</sup> Saatçioğlu (2014: 93) states that the number of imprisoned journalists has constantly increased from 15 in June 2009 to 95 (June 2012) and the number of persons prosecuted under the Anti-Terror Law increased to 150 in 2010.



vilian control over the armed forces in the following years (Çilliler, 2016). The Ergenekon investigation opened in 2008 was the first move, where it was claimed that an allegedly criminal, terrorist network was “attempting to overthrow the government and to undermine its operation by use of violent means” (European Commission, 2008: 6). Such a claim resulted in the arrest of around 300 people, including retired Army generals. The Ergenekon investigation was followed by the Sledgehammer (Balyoz) case in 2010, which claimed that “alleged coup plans were prepared by military officers” and accordingly indicted retired and serving generals including the then Chiefs of the land forces, of the navy, and of the air forces for “establishing a structure outside the military hierarchy and attempting to overthrow the government and constitutional order” (European Commission, 2010: 7).

Besides the judicial context, the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases were argued to be instrumental for the political and ideological transformation that the AKP had been pursuing by changing the power balances in the country (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 991), especially between the elected political power and the military. Accordingly, particularly the Ergenekon case helped the AKP reinforce the discourse that it was the carrier of the national will versus military tutelage, especially within the context of the 2010 constitutional referendum. The 2010 referendum amended the constitution regarding “the appeals allowance of expulsion decisions by the Supreme Military Council (SMC), trial of military officials accused of crimes against state security, limitations of military court’s jurisdiction and removal of immunity for perpetrators of the 1980 military intervention” (Çilliler, 2016: 510). Following the 2011 elections, the AKP were suspected of making use of informal control mechanisms to sustain civilian control through SMC decisions, continuing the Ergenekon/Sledgehammer trials and nominating/promoting military personnel with values closer those of the government and who did not contradict with the Government (Çilliler, 2016: 511).

The Ergenekon/Sledgehammer cases domestically resulted in changing power balances and criminalisation of the political tendencies, which oppose the AKP’s political project (Saraçoğlu and Yeşilbağ, 2015: 992). The trial processes also attracted criticisms from the European Union, especially with regards to the absence of effective judicial guarantees for the suspects, insufficient safeguarding of the rights of defence and the excessive duration of detention period without indictment (European Commission, 2008: 6; European Commission, 2010: 7); and in the case of the Sledgehammer case, with regards to “restrictions on access to certain evidence referred to in the indictment and the failure to give detailed grounds for decisions on detention” (European Commission, 2011: 5-6). In 2012, the EU was still concerned about “the rights of the defence, lengthy pre-trial detention and excessively long and catch-all indictments” and stated that “these cases have been overshadowed by real concerns about their wide scope and the shortcomings in judicial proceedings” in a way to “tend to contribute to the polarisation of Turkish politics” (European Commission, 2012: 7). Thus, the period 2007-2013, made it clear that “civilianisation of military” did not necessarily mean “democratisation” in the Turkish case (Güney, 2013: 146); and even if it



were one of the priorities of the EU, it created a suspicion about the sincerity of the democratisation process.

As pertains to the *Kurdish question*, the 2007-2013 period was one of growing complexity, where countervailing forces were at play. On the one hand, this was a period of the promising secretive Oslo negotiations between MIT and PKK<sup>7</sup> as well as the reformist—if short-lived—drive of the so-called “Kurdish Opening” of 2009.<sup>8</sup> The AKP were then extending an olive’s branch to the Kurdish population. On the other hand, still powerful state institutions arguably outside of AKP-reach led to closure cases against more of the many iterations of the Kurdish political parties—e.g. against the DTP in 2009—and motivated the later so-called KCK arrests of 2010-2012.<sup>9</sup> During this period the EU and other European institutions such as the ECtHR both lost their pertinence to the domestic political scene in Turkey and became a source of division between the AKP and many Turkish-Kurdish groups. The AKP and Erdoğan grew less dependent on the European leverage, including the calls for continuous implementation of minority rights in the annual reports.<sup>10</sup> The Turkish-Kurdish population, on the other hand, who had gotten the opportunity in 1987 to apply directly to the ECtHR (Christie-Miller: 2010), were often disappointed in the statist orientation of the rulings. Also, the EU seemed to get them nowhere. The spark-up of the conflict witnessed towards the end of this period in 2011-12 was born of this frustration; illustrated perhaps with the amnesty promised to 34 returning PKK militants entering Turkey in the border town Habur in 2009. Promised amnesty by the AKP, they were celebrated locally as heroes. The mounting Turkish nationalist pressure got the better of the AKP, the promise was revoked and 17 of them were subsequently arrested and sentenced.<sup>11</sup> During this period the Kurdish issue no longer represented a shared push for convergence with the EU. If not yet a source of outright conflict, an uneasy cooperation emerged in this field. However, the opening of the so-called “Settlement Process” in December 2012 held out a new promise, as will be addressed in the subsequent time-period below.

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<sup>7</sup> These talks have always been shrouded in secrecy, so we merely have comments and statements of the kind mentioned in contexts such as these to go on: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chronology-of-oslo-dialogues-with-pkk.aspx?pageID=238&nID=31190&NewsCatID=338> (accessed last 20 July 2017) and <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/tastekin-legal-turkey-peace-process-kurds-pkk-akp-erdogan.html> (last accessed 20 July 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/tastekin-legal-turkey-peace-process-kurds-pkk-akp-erdogan.html> (last accessed 23 June 2017), and <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/28/kurdish-opening-closed-shut/> (last accessed 20 July 2017). For an overview of some of the aspects of these initiatives, see also Kirişci (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/111-sentenced-to-jail-in-main-kck-case-in-turkeys-south-east.aspx?pageID=238&nID=111366&NewsCatID=509> (last accessed 23 June 2017) and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/28/kurds-turkey-arrests-violence-radicalise> (last accessed 20 July 2017).

<sup>10</sup> As for example Onar and Özgüneş (2010) argue, the slowing of EU induced reforms was palpable already at this relatively early phase of the cooling of relations with the EU.

<sup>11</sup> See Alexander Christie-Miller’s “The PKK and the Closure of Turkey’s Kurdish Opening” <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero080410> (last accessed 23 June 2017).



In the field of *foreign policy*, the 2005-2008 period marks a transition, a period of cooling down of the AKP’s EU drive, especially due to the Turkish frustration with awarding Greek Cyprus with EU membership in spite of the fact that the Greek Cypriots turned down the Annan Plan in 2004. In addition, the mounting criticism of Islam by key European leaders such as French President Sarkozy<sup>12</sup> and the role of Islam in the development of AKP’s foreign policy, for example through the ideas of “strategic depth” of the soon to be appointed Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, became a driver of increasing divergence between Turkey and the EU. Erdoğan’s support for Hamas following the 2006 Palestinian elections, his complete fallout with Israel following the World Economic Forum Davos meeting in 2009 and the infamous Flotilla incident in 2010, as well as his support for Iran at the UN Security Council in 2010 also all raised eyebrows in Europe. This was the case, even if AKP’s Turkey were often also invoked as a model country in a European context, first in the wake of the 9/11 terror bombings in the US and secondly in relation to the 2010-11 Arab Spring.

Less dependent on the unwieldy European leverage for his retention and expansion of domestic political power, Erdoğan was enthralled by the Neo-Ottoman dreams of his then chief policy advisor, Ahmed Davutoğlu’s 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* (never translated into English as Strategic Depth – Turkey’s International Position). During this period that meant a pan-Islamic “Zero Problems with neighbours” approach that included friendly relations with Iran, but also with both Maliki in Iraq and Assad in Syria.<sup>13</sup> Along with the hard-line stance on Israel (and a successful economic development), Erdoğan himself came to be the ostensible hero to the 2011 Arab Spring.

The 2011 Arab Spring marked another turn in the Turkish foreign policy. “Zero Problems” was substituted for a pro-active interactivist approach. Pan-Islamism was substituted for Sunni sectarianism. Support for regional autocrats such as Gadhafi and Assad was substituted for a claimed support for the people, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood as the continued AKP adoption (and adaptation) of the Rabia sign bears witness to.<sup>14</sup> Riding on the wave of the reinvigorated Western image of Turkey as a model country, as well as on a strong showing in the June 2011 general elections, Erdoğan seemed to believe that these foreign policy turns allowed Davutoğlu’s Neo-Ottoman idea of Strategic Depth to come to full fruition, as Erdoğan’s victorious tour of the Arab Spring countries in September 2011<sup>15</sup> seemed to witness.

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<sup>12</sup> A significant identity-related driver also of foreign policy related developments during this period is of course also the ever present representation in leading Turkish media outlets of Europe as an increasingly Islamophobic continent.

<sup>13</sup> Soaps set in the Ottoman past were exported to the region as a token of Turkish soft power.

<sup>14</sup> Deployed as the most visible sign of AKP support, it has even been adopted into the AKP bylaws <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/turkey-s-akp-adopts-muslim-brotherhood-s-rabia-sign-in-its-bylaws-160493.html> (last accessed 20 July 2017).

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/13/world/middleeast/13egypt.html> (last accessed 20 July 2017) and <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/26/turkey-and-arab-spring-pub-43731> (last accessed 20 July 2017) amongst many other news and think tank analyses emphasizing Turkey’s seemingly heroic role to the Arab Spring.



The AKP government started to seem less concerned with the previously meticulously studied European Commission progress reports. To the EU, Erdoğan and his AKP government in the course of two years went from being the much-needed model to the Arab Spring to those responsible for the eye-opening crack-down on the Gezi Protesters in the early summer of 2013. Also Turkey-EU alignment of foreign policy concerns such as Russia’s actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and the development of the conflict in Syria became an increasingly difficult feat. Thus, a conflictual scenario with the EU on foreign policy was looming towards the end of 2013.

In general, the period of 2007-2013 was characterised by the rise of majoritarian rule domestically and a turn towards a unilateral foreign policy externally. From 2007 onwards, the AKP started to lose “its focus on EU-related policy efforts in its domestic as well as foreign policies” (Kalaycıoğlu, 2011: 274). The quest for power centralisation undermined democracy and the rule of law with the potential to threaten Turkey’s EU accession (Cengiz and Hoffmann, 2012: 256). Assuming election victories in 2007 and 2011, the AKP depended less on “the EU reform agenda as an instrument of political empowerment” and it could afford to develop a “pick-and-choose” approach in relation to EU (Saatçioğlu, 2014: 98). Foreign policy and geopolitical orientation changed into a more unilateral orientation emphasising Turkey’s “strategic autonomy” as a central actor with strategic depth in several regions. Alternative identity-driven narratives such as neo-Ottomanism has risen and challenged the Westernisation and Europeanisation narratives. In this transition period characterised by loose cooperation, the domestic political changes presents us with a foray into a shift from a cooperative to a conflictual one in the next period of Turkey-EU relations.

#### **4. Authoritarianism on the Rise – Isolation in Foreign Policy (2013 to present)**

2013 was another turning point in Turkey’s history, which brought a profound and rapid political transformation. From then on there have been serious shifts in the ideological orientation, as well as in internal organisation and system of alliances of the AKP as a party, in the relations with various international actors and most importantly in the structure of political regime and the ruling system of the country. By 2017, such a rapid transformation proceeds on an increasingly thorny path, instigating yet-unresolved tensions and contentions in the domain not only of political power struggles, but also of societal relations. Variants of “authoritarianism” is often used to capture the nature of this transformation and the trajectory of developments since 2013. What characterised the period from 2013 to the present has been the quest of the AKP to monopolise power by side-lining any restrictive political force and eliminating or in some cases circumventing legal and institutional obstacles. This process has gone hand in hand with, and indeed entailed a process of, subverting the very fundamental elements of the longstanding parliamentary democracy, as well as political traditions in Turkey. This tactic was also followed in its international relations, which has manifested itself, for example towards the EU in many occasions, whenever the EU was perceived as a threat to AKP’s political power.



It is not a coincidence that the year 2013 marked the onset of such a precarious transformation. It was in late May and early June of 2013 that Turkey witnessed the biggest and the most long-lasting protests in its history. The uprising started with initially small group of protestors in late May in Istanbul that opposed the government’s initiative to build a shopping mall in Gezi Park nearby Taksim Square. When the protestors faced violent police intervention, the demonstrations soon took the form of a massive uprising all across Turkey, especially in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Eskişehir and Hatay, where violent clashes between the security forces and the protestors led to the death of 11 young individuals. The uprising possessed an amorphous social composition as it brought together various sections of society such as the ecologists, socialists, the Alevis and the secularists, who were long discontented with the AKP’s recent discourses and policies for different but overlapping reasons such as the aggressive profit-seeking neoliberal urban policies, the government’s support of Sunni opposition groups in the Syria and rigid Sunni interpretation of Islam, and degrading the foundational principles and figures of the Turkish Republic, as well as the forms of secular life style (Saraçoğlu, 2015).

The Gezi protests showed that the AKP government had alienated large sections of urban population and lacked any ideological instruments to manufacture their consent (Öniş, 2015: 29-33). The fact that this situation could lead to a popular movement that could have the potential to derail the AKP’s search for consolidating its political power has led the party to seek the ways and strategies of tightening its control over state apparatus. At the core of these strategies lies the search of the AKP to consolidate its support base through a rigid Islamist nationalist outlook (Özbudun, 2014: 157-160), to position it against the dissident sections of society and to use this support base as leverage for initiating fundamental changes in the political system. By these methods the AKP has sought to ensure that the party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan possess an unrestricted power in decision making processes. For this aim, the AKP and Erdoğan could even challenge the criticisms of EU, as a response to the restrictions of freedom of speech and demonstration during the Gezi protests, which eventually increased the distance between Turkey and the EU in terms of democratic standards.

The Gezi incidents not only deepened the polarisation of society between the AKP supporters and the dissidents, it also unleashed some longstanding but submerged frictions within the power-bloc itself. These contentions reached its peak point in December 2013 when Fethullah Gülen community’s clandestine members inside the state apparatus, particularly in judiciary and security, leaked some private phone conversations of the leading AKP members and ministers even including Erdoğan and his family, who allegedly had been involved in some corrupt business relations. For many years, the Gülen community had more or less explicitly cooperated with the AKP on their shared interests. The Gülen network had used its media force to garner domestic and international support for its rule and more importantly had allegedly mobilised its secret networks in the state to purge the secularist cadres from the state apparatus—including the judiciary and military—to put pressure on the dissident political groups by means of also allegedly fabricated indictments and lawsuits as it was the case in Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. Nevertheless



the AKP and the Gülenists fell out with regards to a number of differences on the Kurdish issue and relations with Israel, but above all with regards to power sharing within the state. These contentions intensified after the aforementioned new strategy of the party to take full control of the state. The December 2013 assaults against the AKP's leading political figures marked the beginning of last stage of these contentions and the "dramatic" suspension of longstanding implicit alliance between the party and the community. Nevertheless, by mobilising its police force against the Gülen-connected prosecutors and police forces who organised such a plot the AKP eventually succeeded in evading the community's attempt to undermine the authority of the government.

After the AKP government warded off at least temporarily such threats it was now ready use its support base to fully control the state. The first step was August 2014 Presidential elections through which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the country's first popularly elected president by 51,8% of the vote. Having acquired the top position of the state through a country-wide election rather than a parliamentary vote unlike the other presidents, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tended to go beyond the legal and institutional limits and the norm of impartiality designated for the presidency and opted for acting rather as the actual leader of his party and the head of Government as well.

The biggest blow to this strategy came in June 2015 national parliamentary elections, where the AKP won the election with a mere 41% of the votes. Thus, it lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 13 years and hence their ability to form a single-party government. Another remarkable aspect of this election was the surprising success shown by the HDP, through a bloc of pro-Kurdish and leftist political forces under the leadership of Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş. Surprisingly the HDP gained 13% of the votes and earned 81 parliamentary seats. This was the first time the pro-Kurdish forces formed a group in the parliament through entering the elections as a party. Not permitting the AKP to form the government on its own, the election results represented a setback in the AKP's strategy of accumulating power in the state. One of the options could have been forming a coalition government, but this would have been obviously dissonant with the AKP's strategy after the Gezi protests. In lieu of doing this, with the implicit directives of Erdoğan, the AKP implicitly refuted all possibilities of coalition and carried the country to repeat election in November 2015. In both elections, Erdoğan's active role in the election campaign, "perceived as favouring the ruling party" was also acknowledged by the European Commission (2015: 9).

The election interval between June and November elections witnessed probably the most chaotic and violent period of the modern Turkish history. The chain of violence started in Suruç district of Şanlıurfa province bordering Syrian town Kobane. A bomb attack on 20 July, which was claimed by the ISIL, killed 31 young Turkish socialists who were there to discuss the reconstruction of neighbouring Syrian town, Kobane, which was then under the control of Kurdish forces. When the PKK responded to this massacre by killing two policemen, the violent clashes between the Turkish military and the PKK re-escalated and continued unabated throughout the election period. On September 2015 PKK attacks led to the death of 17 soldiers in Hakkari's Dağlica, "being the deadliest terrorist attack" conducted by the PKK "since the launching of peace process in 2012" (Esen



and Gümüşçü, 2016: 1581). ISIL continued to contribute to the atmosphere of chaos and instability between two elections by carrying out another bomb attack in October 2015 on a peace meeting and demonstration in Ankara that was held by the socialist/leftist and pro-Kurdish political forces and civil society organisations. This was the deadliest terror attack in Turkish history taking the lives of 102 people. In the presence of the poisoned atmosphere created by these and other terror attacks between June and November, the opposition forces could hardly organise a second election campaign. They could also not develop a coherent and powerful discourse against the AKP which depicted such a chaotic process as the consequence of precariousness brought about by the June elections (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016: 1581). The AKP criminalised the HDP by associating it with some of these terrorist attacks, co-opted the staunchly anti-Kurdish and Turkish Nationalist MHP, and urged the people to vote for the AKP for ensuring stability. This election tactic seemed to work out for the AKP as it got 49% of votes and regained the parliamentary majority that it lost in the June elections.

The AKP and the president Erdoğan made use of this election victory in November 2015 to accelerate the process of building complete control over the state's security and ideological apparatus. This was coupled with the sharpening of the Islamist-nationalist discourse that was used to further consolidate the party supporters against potential social opposition. Erdoğan was the orchestrating figure of this process who seemed to have the last say in the most decisive decisions taken by the party and the cabinet. When Erdoğan's vision and some policies of then Prime Minister of Ahmet Davutoğlu started to collide, Davutoğlu was forced to resign and was replaced in the party congress by Binalı Yıldırım, who at least at that point had shown almost complete allegiance to Erdoğan. The AKP government has also attempted to use the November elections as an opportunity to purge as much as possible the cadres of Fethullah Gülen from the state and put pressure on its economic and social networks.

The night of 15 July 2016 was a turning point in this struggle for power as the Gülen community's hidden networks in the army seemingly carried out a failed coup attempt against the AKP Government. The AKP managed to survive in the face of the coup attempt owing to the limited support given in the army to the organisers of the putsch as well as the people taking the streets as a response to Erdoğan's call. During the night of 15 July hundreds lost their lives in Istanbul and Ankara in their attempt to stop the coup (Somer, 2016: 8). There are still some on-going debates with regards to the underlying intentions, real agents and the course of this coup attempt, but it is widely believed that Gülen community played the leading role during this process.

Although the coup attempt was a real threat to the AKP and Erdoğan's augmenting power, its failure created a very favourable political and social context for the realisation of the aforementioned strategy of the AKP and its leader: the use of its consolidated social base as a leverage to take full control of the state power. Shortly after the failed coup attempt, the parliament with the support of the AKP and MHP (Nationalist Action Party) introduced a state of emergency which granted the government the legal right to rule the country with the decrees having force of law.



The AKP have been using these decrees to purge the people from government positions who are suspected of having affiliations to the Gülen community. Nevertheless, the purges have not remained limited to the Gülenists. Many leftist-oriented or pro-Kurdish state officials especially teachers and academics have also been cleansed from the public institutions (Öktem and Akkoyunlu, 2016: 473).

The failure of the coup attempt also gave the opportunity for the AKP and Erdoğan to take the most important step towards achieving a full control over the state through changing the political regime of the country: a constitutional change that would enable the presidency to act officially as the head of the party, of the government cabinet and of the state at the same time. With the support of the MHP and in the face of fierce opposition from the other opposition and dissident sections of society the AKP carried such a constitutional amendment to a referendum. This radical change in the political regime of Turkey would give the President almost an absolute power in taking the governmental decisions, choosing the ministers, devising the annual budget, declaring state of emergency and appointing judges and prosecutors. The referendum that took place on 16 April 2017 ended with a tight victory of “Yes” vote with 51%. The legitimacy of the referendum results have not ceased to be controversial as the AKP Government has been accused by its opponents of suppressing and criminalising the “no” campaign and of not running the voting process in a lawful and fair manner, as also noted by some international observers such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Committee (PACE). Leaving aside all these controversies, the referendum has marked the most critical step in the AKP’s and Erdoğan’s strategy of fully controlling state power and in Turkey’s thorny path towards subversive authoritarianism.

In this political context, both domestic and international stakeholders have voiced serious concerns about the state of *democracy* in Turkey. As “a clean normative break from the EU’s liberal democratic value system” (Saatçioğlu, 2016: 136), the implications of the force used by the police during the Gezi protests was just the beginning of a democratic backsliding, which would be followed by political tendencies to suppress democratic rights in Turkey since 2013. The changes to the structures and the composition of high courts in December 2014<sup>16</sup>, threats to the independence of the judiciary, restrictions to the freedom of expression including those on the Internet, human rights and minority rights have been serious concerns with regards to democratisation. On top of that, add the court cases against journalists, writers, social media users and others in the society that were launched for alleged insult against the President, which sometimes ended up with even prison sentences or punitive fines (European Commission, 2015: 23). After the coup attempt in June 2016, the measures taken with the declared state of emergency, which was initially for a three-month period but was extended continuously since then until present, included “very extensive suspensions, dismissals and arrests over alleged links to the Gülen movement” and “serious human rights violations, including alleged widespread ill-treatment and torture of

<sup>16</sup> The law adopted in December 2014 (Law No. 6572), which, among other measures, restructured the Court of Cassation (Yargıtay) and the Council of State (Danıştay), by introducing new chambers and members, were seen by many critics to increase governmental interference (Saatçioğlu, 2016: 140).



detainees” were reported (European Commission, 2016: 9). The measures would soon be broadened to pro-Kurdish and other opposition groups. In this process, the delays in the proper functioning of the administrative review mechanisms for suspended or dismissed civil servants, such as the ad hoc Appeals Commission, puts doubts on the recovery of democratic principles and processes in Turkey.

The clash between the AKP and Gülenist religious community eventually changed the course of *civil-military relations* via the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. The Ergenekon case, which was finalised at first instance in August 2013 with severe sentences to the detainees, was appealed to be re-tried, with the argument that clandestine Gülenist network manipulated both the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases (Kutay, 2016: 18), especially through its network within the judiciary. Accordingly, the government announced those cases as “a plot against the Turkish army carried out by the Gülenist movement” (Çilliler, 2016: 511). In March 2014, the Constitutional Court concluded that the former chief of staff had been “unlawfully deprived of his freedom”, highlighting “the mishandling of the investigations and subsequent trials in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases”, which resulted in the release of 52 convicts of the Ergenekon case (European Commission, 2014: 12). A similar pattern has been observed in the Sledgehammer case, where all the defendants were acquitted by a High Criminal Court in the re-trial of the case in March 2015 (European Commission, 2015: 11). Thus, the inconsistencies and incoherencies of the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases were linked to the political activity of the clandestine Gülenist network against the Government, and eventually both cases lost their political significance, which arguably helped the AKP and Erdoğan co-opt both the military and other nationalist segments in their favour.

The 15 July coup attempt has so far been the last stage of the AKP’s struggle against the military. This time, the target was not the military per se, but the clandestine Gülenist network as the alleged mind behind the coup attempt. As an immediate measure against any military threat, the AKP government did not only announce a state of emergency, but also expanded its power over the military immediately through a series of measures. The first move was to conduct vast suspensions, dismissals, arrests and detentions for the members of the military besides many others in civil service and business circles (European Commission, 2016: 5). Simultaneously, through a number of governmental decrees, the organisational structure of the Turkish armed forces was changed; military educational institutions were closed down; the force commanders were attached to the Ministry of National Defence; the composition of the Supreme Military Council was changed in a way to increase the number of civilian members to ten, while the military members were reduced to four (European Commission, 2016: 13).

Although the coup attempt was considered as “a direct attack on democracy in Turkey” and immediately and strongly condemned by the EU, which “reiterated its full support to the democratic institutions of the country”, the post-coup attempt measures created serious concerns with re-



gards to observance of the standards of the rule of law and fundamental rights such as the proportionality of the measures taken; the access to and effectiveness of judicial remedies; and, reports of serious human rights violations, including alleged widespread ill-treatment and torture of detainees (European Commission, 2016: 5, 8).

Thus, although the reorganisation of the military and increasing civilian control over the military have been positively perceived by the EU with some reservations, extensive post-coup attempt measures taken by the AKP have created serious concerns for the European counterparts, including also the Council of Europe. The already conflictual Turkey-EU relations since 2013 has the potential to get worse, especially if the AKP Government tends to disregard the remarks directed by the EU in relation to human rights and rule of law. Voicing the re-introduction of capital punishment for the perpetrators of the coup attempt by the President of the country has been a clear sign of such a risk that could even bring Turkey’s EU journey to a definitive end.

With regards to the *Kurdish issue*, this period was marked by an abrupt turn from the 2012-2015 “Settlement Process” to an unprecedented level of conflict between the Turkish Government and Turkey’s most prominent Kurdish group, the PKK. Characteristic of this age of unpredictability, December 2012 took many by surprise with the public announcement of initiated negotiations for a settlement of the conflict between the AKP, the MIT and Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan even had a speech read out in the March 2013 Newruz celebrations that made reference to a deep history of co-existence under Islam in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> In the so-called “Democratisation Package” of September 2013<sup>18</sup>, the AKP also legalised Kurdish as a means of instruction in private schools, rendered legal the Kurdish letters W, Q and X, legalised public campaigns in Kurdish, lowered the threshold from 7% to 3% for a party to get public funding following national elections, promised to return Turkified place- and town-names to their original names, and banned the national oath from primary schools where Kurdish-Turkish kids for decades have had to declared themselves as Turks. The PKK asked for and got a legal framework for their laying down of arms in the early summer of 2015. By that time, however, the stand-off around Kobanê on the Syrian border with Turkey, unwieldy Kurdish-Turkish BDP mayors and the angry Kurdish-Turkish youth of the PKK youth group. YDG-H digging trenches and declaring self-rule in neighbourhoods in many Kurdish-Turkish towns had already soured the “Settlement Process.” Also, AKP’s crack-down on the summer 2013 Gezi demonstrations and the 17-25 December 2013 graft probes had made more and more voters of the left-leaning liberal minority turn to the charismatic HDP co-leader, Selahattin Demirtaş at the Presidential elections of 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. <http://www.euronews.com/2013/03/22/web-full-transcript-of-abdullah-ocalans-ceasefire-call-kurdish-pkk> for a translation of his speech read out at the Newruz celebrations (last accessed 20 July 2017).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/democratization-package-kurds-turkey-minorities.html>, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/erdogan-describes-democratization-package.html> and <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/63-the-democratization-package-and-erdo%C4%9Ffans-hall-of-mirrors.html> (all last accessed 20 July 2017) for news coverage of the contents of the package.



The daring Settlement Process coupled with domestic and regional developments almost jeopardised the AKP’s accustomed electoral success in the June 2015 general elections. Turning to a hard line stance on the PKK both regionally and domestically the AKP was back on electoral form in November 2015, by being able to regain votes from conservative Turkish-Kurdish groups as well as nationalist Turkish groups and by reducing the Kurdish question to but a terror problem. A liberalisation of the anti-terror legislation within the context of Readmission Agreement of the EU is not on the table, even if it could grant him the political success of ridding many Turkish businesspersons and students of the hated need to get visas in order to travel to the EU. The Kurdish issue once again became one of rights’ abuses vs. terrorism and as such a source of conflict between Turkey and the EU. Moreover, Turkish perceptions that European countries nested and supported not merely the PYD in Syria, but also the PKK in Europe broadened the scope of this source of conflict, not merely to the de-alignment of engagements in Syria and Iraq, but also directly into Turkey-EU relations. With the AKP government’s perceptions of terrorist threats posed by in particular the PKK still on the rise in the summer of 2017 in mind, it is highly likely that the Kurdish issue will be and remain a driver of conflict for Turkey-EU relations in the near future.

*Turkish foreign policy* since 2013 has taken a dip from the ideological heights of Davutoğlu’s Neo-Ottoman “Strategic Depth” to what this paper will refer to as a “power-pragmatic realism” wrapped in a rhetoric reminiscent of “the Islamic-Turkish Synthesis” of the 1980-Coup.

To unfold, Syria is a good place to start. Already in 2011, Erdoğan’s soon-to-be former friend, Bashar Al-Assad, not only failed to pay heed to Erdoğan’s initial reformist advice, but being a Shiite autocrat cracking down on a Sunni-Muslim population, Erdoğan would soon support all-sorts of Sunni-Muslim opposition groups against Assad. This likely included extremist Sunni-Muslim groups. This soon became a real issue for Europe as their primary concern in Syria was the likes of Sunni-extremist groups including ISIS.<sup>19</sup> Having circumvented European sanctions on Russia in 2014 and used the mounting refugee flow as part of a tough bargaining process with Europe in 2015, there was little European support for Turkey as Russia turned on Turkey following the Turkish downing of a Russian jet in November 2015. Having lost the support also of other countries such as Iran and the Sisi regime in Egypt, Strategic Depth seemed to have completely isolated Turkey.

Strategic Depth had become a liability. And so had its architect, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Having taken a beating in the June 2015 general elections, Erdoğan turned against the Kurds he had been negotiating with since December 2012 and adopted the Turkish Nationalist language he had distanced himself from previously.

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note here, that no public evidence is available to the effect that Erdoğan actively supported ISIS.



Having mended fences with Russia following the 15th of July coup attempt, Turkey’s new three step plan for Syria<sup>20</sup> was introduced under the banner of “territorial integrity.” AKP’s ideological shift from support of Sunni-Muslim insurgents to a strong stance on the retention of “national integrity” enabled the AKP government to re-engage with Russia on Syria. Russia would not block a Turkish incursion into the region separating the two Kurdish cantons, Afrin and Kobanê, arguably in a trade-off agreement where Turkey would lift its support for anti-Assad insurgents in Aleppo. The AKP government’s primary foreign policy concern in Syria thus seemed to be the driving of a wedge into the Kurdish dream of connecting their cantons into one continuous region in the Syrian north. This created quite a bit of friction with those also European partners in the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve, who worked closely with the Kurds in the achievement of their primary goal in Syria, the defeat of ISIS.

Midway through 2017, Erdoğan and the AKP Government has thus left the ideological high ground of neo-Ottomanism -at least for the time being- and adopted a power-pragmatic and realist approach to foreign policy. An example of this is the rapprochement with Israel in the name of establishing Turkey as an energy hub also for Israeli natural gas. Whether or not this fall-back realist position will see Erdoğan make one of his many and more frequent turns on the EU is difficult to predict. If he does, bickering over claimed European support for the PKK could take a back seat e.g. to transactional concerns with a good deal on the Customs Union up for renegotiation. This, however, is unlikely to return Turkey and EU in the field of foreign policy to a convergence track, but it could help stem outright conflict otherwise likely.

Thus, the period from 2013 to mid-2017 can be characterised by the practices of rising authoritarianism domestically and isolation through unilateralism in foreign policy. At the domestic level, to the extent that societal polarisation as well as authoritarian practices increase, the EU process becomes more interest driven, which is increasingly instrumentalised from “partnership” to “enmity.” The 15th of July coup attempt and long-lasting emergency rule that accompanied it have provided the grounds for increasing authoritarian tendencies, with a de facto presidential system with sweeping executive powers, which will fully enter into force in 2019. On the foreign policy front, a unilateral foreign policy orientation intensifies with increasing tensions with the West (USA) and the EU, and also in the neighbourhood, leading to isolation of Turkey as an international actor. The outcomes turn from zero problems with the neighbours into “zero neighbours.” In addition, alternative anti-Western narratives of neo-Ottomanism and “Erdoganism” became more predominant. Thus, AKP’s political consolidation, and Erdoğan as the leading figure of such consolidation, at the expense of increasing authoritarianism in this period depicts the rising salience of “conflict” as the predominant scenario in the Turkey-EU relationship.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-suggests-three-step-road-map-for-syria-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=102851&NewsCatID=510> (last accessed 21 July 2017), and <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/turkey-iraq-syria-isis-raqqa-mosul.html> (last accessed 21 July 2017).



## 5. Conclusion

This paper has traced significant political changes in Turkey since 1999 within the key areas of democratisation, civil-military relations, the Kurdish issue and foreign policy and identified not only distinctive areas of political transformation but also, and more importantly, the main drivers of the changes and transformations. This has been done to analyse what drivers have corresponded to a particular status or development of the trajectory of Turkey-EU relationship. The overall gist is that the drivers identified have driven the Turkish political landscape from an inclusive democratic orientation/multilateral foreign policy constellation towards a rising authoritarianism/isolation in foreign policy configuration especially since the 2002 under the rule of consecutive AKP Governments.

When each driver is revisited with its relevance to the future of Turkey-EU relations, the process tracing exercise clearly signals the increasing possibility of a conflictual pattern in the Turkey-EU relationship in the coming years. The examination of the democratisation process in Turkey has demonstrated that there has been a major “backsliding” in terms of democratisation, as labelled by the European Commission. The visible lack of necessary conditions for rule of law, justice and fundamental rights jeopardises Turkey’s EU candidacy process and likely “rules out EU membership for Turkey for the foreseeable future.” Pertaining to the civil-military relations, although the civilian control of the military increased over time, tracing the processes of such a civilianisation shows that it has not necessarily resulted in a “democratic” control of military, which in turn appears as another factor that could risk any possibilities of a cooperative relation with the EU in the near future.

On the Kurdish issue, there have been attempts to change the attitudes and policies, but these initiatives basically remained at the level of “instrumentalisation” of the Kurdish issue, rather than addressing substantial matters. Co-opting the Kurdish and liberal segments of Turkish society made the early AKP Governments appear on a track towards convergence with the EU-stance on e.g. minority rights. Arguably, Erdoğan for a long time insisted on this constructive approach to the Kurds through the 2009 opening and 2013 democratic reforms. But since 2015, Erdoğan has adopted a hard-line Turkish nationalist language and found domestic political survival in the staunch anti-Kurdish stance this has entailed. The ever increasing unpredictability of the Turkish political landscape to the side, it is unlikely that this new line will be the source of anything but conflict in relation to the EU in the 2023 timeframe.

On the foreign policy front, the multilateral foreign policy orientation transformed into a unilateral foreign policy orientation, intensified with increasing tensions with the West (USA), the EU and in the neighbourhood, which eventually lead to isolation of Turkey as an international actor in time. Alignment with the EU is likely to happen only ad hoc and on a few isolated areas of overlapping interests such as the 2015-16 migration statement, but the overall thrust within this field is an increasingly independent Turkey acting alone, without notice of possible alignment with the EU and increasingly at odds with the European foreign policy interests. Conflict is also will also emerge



as the most likely 2023 scenario in this field.

With the challenges both from within and outside Turkey, there is no doubt that Turkey enters a critical conjuncture with rising political struggles and possibilities of new political coalitions. However, the critical question is whether or not the current configuration is sustainable. The challenges created by the current configuration create high risks with increasing tensions without providing solutions to multiple challenges. Thus, 2018 and 2019 will show whether the AKP regime will consolidate towards an authoritarian presidential system or open possibilities for a more democratic system. The outcomes of the domestic political struggles in this process will have a major impact not only on domestic politics, but also in Turkey’s international orientation. The possibility of a “democratic turn” as a result of any coalition forces that would unite around core issues such as the rule of law, justice and freedom could affect the trajectory of the Turkey-EU relationship, which would eventually create the possibility of a more cooperative relationship. As witnessed before, political transformations and the rise of a more inclusive democratic orientation could be quite influential for a more cooperative relationship with the EU. Whilst there are debates in Europe about the suspension of the accession negotiations with Turkey, it should be borne in mind that in Turkey there are also increasing societal demands for a “democratic turn”, which has the potential to lead to a “turn” in the relationship with the EU. Whether or not such a new coalition can be considered as a “wild card”, its possible impact on changing not only the course of political transformation in Turkey, but also that of the Turkey-EU relations should be seriously considered by the European Union.



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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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