

EU Hands the Ball Back to Turkey

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The outcome of Turkey's 16 April constitutional referendum ushers in the most radical transformation of the country since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Republic in 1923. It consolidated and extended the powers that Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan had already *de facto* acquired. On 2 May Erdogan returned to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and he is expected to be elected as the chairman of the party on 21 May at an extraordinary convention. Yet with the 'yes' campaign only taking some 51.4 percent of the vote – much less than they would have wished - it was a slim victory. Moreover, given the unfair playing field (as was confirmed by the OSCE) the result can hardly be read as a strong mandate. Furthermore, the success and resilience of the 'No' campaigners, despite the difficult conditions clearly demonstrates that Turkish democracy is not yet dead and buried. Rather there are millions of Turks with a strong democratic culture who need to be engaged and supported.

While the result showed how divided Turkey is, it also underlined how at odds the country is with European values and norms. The earlier decision of PACE to reinstate a monitoring process on Turkey after 13 years is a clear indication of this. Turkey is the only country ever to be monitored and cleared then return to monitored status. It is incredibly sad that the important reforms that were carried out in order to meet the Copenhagen Criteria and strengthen Turkish democracy have gradually been reversed over the last five years or so as the rule of law and civil liberties and freedoms have been systematically eroded, with Turkey-EU relations deteriorating in parallel.

While Turkey-EU relations seemed set for a full-on road crash prior to the referendum, at the recent meeting of EU foreign ministers in Malta, despite a number of EU politicians, the European Parliament and experts calling for the EU to officially suspend accession negotiations with Turkey, this did not happen. Rather the EU has left things as they are – at least for the time being – placing the ball back in Turkey's hands. EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini stressed that it was up to Turkey 'to express their willingness to continue to be a candidate country and to continue to be interested, or to not join our family.' In fact the accession process is already frozen. As Aaron Stein from the Atlantic Council recently put it, 'the EU process is like a zombie – it exists but it is dead.' It has been more or less that way for years, certainly long before Turkish democracy began to backslide. Furthermore at the European Council in December 2016, EU leaders agreed not to open any more negotiating chapters until democracy was restored. And let's be honest, there is no interest whatsoever from the EU in having Turkey as a member. Indeed there has not been genuine support for Turkish membership for decades. Still the EU does not want to make any rash decisions with such an important partner. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* German Chancellor, Angela Merkel emphasised that Europe should not simply push Turkey away. The fact that one in every two Turkish citizens voted against the constitutional changes is also an important reason not to take a hasty decision. Engaging in dialogue with those parts of its society who aspire to a European-style democratic system and who want to see their country to continue on a liberal, secular path, should be a priority of the EU. Ultimately it is in the EU's interest to ensure Turkey remains anchored as strongly as possibly to Europe, although there are clearly many forces in Europe who will continue to push back against this approach.

So with the ball back in Turkey's court could President Erdogan take steps to end Turkey's accession process? Will he declare that EU membership is no longer a strategic goal? No doubt Erdogan would much prefer for the EU to do this is. While he has talked about putting

it to a public referendum this clearly has risks, including the possible negative impact on the economy and foreign investment – something that Turkey can ill-afford. So I am sceptical this is likely to happen in the short term. The first priority is getting the economy back on track and shoring up investor confidence. And also let's not forget that despite the blustery anti-EU narrative that Erdogan is renowned for, Europe, and more broadly the Euro-Atlantic alliance remain of significant importance for Turkey in terms of trade, economy and security. No other partner – certainly not the Russians – can replace this.

So what next? The meeting that will reportedly (although it is not yet confirmed) take place between President Erdogan and the Presidents of the European Council and Commission, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker on the side lines of the NATO Summit in Brussels on 24-25 May could prove crucial in terms of how dynamics will roll-out in the short-term; in terms of developing a new framework for relations. The positions of both sides are likely to be examined in detail. Discussions are likely to focus on areas where both have something to gain from cooperation and where a possible roadmap for the future can be pulled together. Beyond the key areas of security and counter-terrorism cooperation; migration; and advancing with the upgrading of the Customs Union, something which is important for Turkey, Erdogan is likely to press the EU on the issues of visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals, and the speeding up of the payment of 6 billion euros of support for the refugees that Turkey is hosting. Hence going forward it is more than likely that Turkey-EU relations will be a transactional sort of relationship, in a way resembling the US-Turkey relationship with cooperation narrowly defined. Clearly further deterioration is also possible – the worst case scenario being if the death penalty were introduced. Bringing back the death penalty – which has been declared redline for the EU – could see the EU finally terminate Turkey's accession process. In any case, Turkey-EU relations seem set to remain difficult for the foreseeable future with little chance of the Turkish authorities returning to a democratic reform agenda. No doubt the priority of the President and soon to be Chairman of the AKP will be reshaping and reenergising the party, including taking steps to strengthen the party's support base in order to secure a strong, rather than a wave thin, victory in the 2019 presidential elections.