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TURKEY AND THE EU, a critical turn in relations

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On the 21st of January the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid his first visit to Brussels in five years when the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy invited him. After this long interval and a growing estrangement between Turkey and the EU, it was again a French President, François Hollande, who invited Erdogan who was accompanied his Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu and his new EU Minister Mevlüt Çavuşolu. Talks were held with the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, the European Commission Chairman Jose Manuel Durao Barroso and the president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz. At every meeting that day, Erdogan faced pointed questions regarding political developments inside Turkey. Before the visit, both Çavuşolu and Davutoglu reiterated Turkey's commitments to EU standards of democracy. They expected relations between Turkey and the EU would improve as efforts got under way to open two new chapters of negotiation, including a chapter on the judiciary and fundamental rights. But with every expression of concern from the EU, Erdogan could not help underlining, as he saw it, the extraordinary developments Turkey had witnessed in recent weeks. He sees them as part of a "conspiracy" against his government, a "conspiracy" which has international ramifications.

This timely visit took place at a critical juncture for Turkey-EU relations. The arrest, last December 17, on charges of corruption, of well known scions of the establishment led to the resignation of four members of Erdogan's cabinet, including the EU Minister. The government hit back by purging the judiciary and police. Instead of focusing on the corruption affairs, the AKP government perceived them as a plot to damage the party's image on the eve of local elections which are due in March. The government then moved to purge the banking and telecoms sectors as well as the state television of people accused of "plotting" against it. A draft bill giving the government greater control over the appointment of judges and prosecutors alarmed Brussels. But Erdogan defended the text, arguing that it would bolster, not weaken, the judicial independence through curbing the power of Fethullah Gulen, a U.S.-based cleric and former ally of his whom he believes has infiltrated the police and the judiciary. Erdogan believes the whole episode was an attempted "judicial coup" to undermine him ahead of elections, the EU expressed its concerns and underlined the significance of the rule of law as a crucial component of EU membership criteria.

The EU was right

After its official membership application in 1987, Ankara began negotiations to join the EU in 2005, but very soon faced a number of obstacles, notably the Cyprus question and the resistance of Germany and France to its membership. The relations with the EU provided Turkey with the necessary incentives and a roadmap for political and economic reform, which was crucial especially in times of deep crisis such as the one Turkey was experiencing in 2001. In the early 2000s amid a deep political crisis of the coalition government and the economic collapse as a result of financial crisis, the AKP emerged as a reformist party supported by various groups which constituted many *de facto* centres of power in the country. These included Istanbul based big business, Anatolian based small and medium enterprises, liberal intellectuals and reformist bureaucrats. Over the past decade the AKP government issued nine reform packages to start the accession negotiations and gained three consecutive elections all predicated on an agenda aimed at democratisation. These bold reforms were welcomed in the US and Europe and the AKP was celebrated in international circles as a reformist party. It was also portrayed as a model for good governance and the accommodation of political Islam and democracy in the context of the Arab Spring. However, recent events in the country demonstrated that the EU was right in stating that ‘the irreversibility of the reforms process, its implementation in particular with regard to fundamental freedoms, will need to be confirmed over a long period of time’ on the eve of deciding to open accession negotiations in 2004. At that time, when the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations, authorities in Brussels stated that Turkey had sufficiently fulfilled the political criteria but concluded that, regardless of its outcome, the negotiation process was essential to reinforce and guide further reforms in Turkey, particularly in relation to the ‘continued fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria’.

The deepening of EU–Turkey relations was thought to be necessary to anchor Turkey in European structures. However, Erdogan’s visit in Brussels in the midst of a crackdown on the judiciary and police showed Turkey looks further than ever from its goal of EU membership. The visit aimed to give positive momentum for a new round of membership talks initiated in November, after being delayed by EU states in protest over a Turkish crackdown on anti-government demonstrations last summer. In fact the tension between Brussels and Ankara increased over Turkey’s gradual sliding backwards in democratic criteria which was clear for all to see when the government cracked down hard on protesters occupying Gezi Park last June in Istanbul. The government’s crackdown on the judiciary the police and the media in recent weeks has done nothing to refurbish the prime minister’s democratic credentials.

In recent years and in the context of the dramatic developments in Africa and the Middle East, notably in Syria, Turkey appeared as an important ally for the EU in the region. Many observers had concluded that, more than ever before, Turkey and the EU needed each other to help secure greater peace and security in the eastern Mediterranean. But that is not how matters have worked out. The prime minister’s response to the probe into corruption, which hit people very close to him disappointed many political leaders in Europe who saw Erdogan’s behaviour as further evidence of the authoritarian tendencies of a leader hitherto celebrated as a potential model of democratic leadership in the Muslim world.

Erdogan’s latest foray to Brussels underlined how important the rebuilding of trust between the Turkish government and the EU has become. Turkey has not given up its EU vocation but the commitment of the Turkish government to the accession criteria is still weak. The developments of recent weeks mark a

considerable setback in the relationship between Turkey and the EU. The threat to the region resulting from the very unstable situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular the appalling humanitarian and security in Syria should encourage a spirit of cooperation between the EU and Turkey, an attempt to bring foreign policies aims closer. Whether a spirit of cooperation prevails over one of fear and mistrusts is anybody's guess.