
Surrounded by trouble, hit by conflict: Turkey and its manifold challenges

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Theme

Located in a difficult zone of conflict and power struggles between multiple players, Turkey is experiencing some hard times. Difficulties regarding its foreign policy are currently coupled with turmoil in its domestic politics, rising conflict and threats against democracy.

Summary

Turkey is no stranger to conflict, due to its position in a difficult geostrategic location. Yet it has rarely been surrounded by such diverse sources of conflict all at once. Amidst the current bloodshed in the region, it would be difficult to say which of these sources poses the greatest menace to Turkey. Sharing an 822km border with Syria, Turkey has a neighbouring civil war, hosts 2.2 million Syrian refugees and is almost adjacent to the areas controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), with which it has an uneasy rapport. Having taken a firm stance to oust the Assad regime following some U-turns, it is in the midst of the competition over regional domination between many players, the most important of which are Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, as important as its conflicts of foreign origin are its home-grown ones, particularly the renewed terrorist attacks and the rising tension in an increasingly polarised society where liberties and some of the fundamental democratic principles are being increasingly undermined. Discussing some of the current challenges faced by Turkey in both its domestic politics and its foreign policy, this paper will first analyse the emerging dominant-party regime and its challenges and then evaluate some of its pressing foreign policy issues, focusing on the civil war in Syria and its ramifications for Turkey, including the refugee crisis and the tensions with Russia as well as the recently revived EU-Turkey relations.

Analysis

Internal and external perils often pose significant challenges to incumbent political parties. Interestingly enough, the situation is reversed in the Turkish case, where such pressures seem to contribute to the further solidification of popularity for the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP's unexpected success in the re-run elections of November 2015 confirmed the establishment of a 'dominant-party regime' in Turkey, where the same political party has been given the mandate to govern for the fourth time since 2002. Although dominant-party regimes have historically existed in various parts of the world, including Italy, Sweden and Japan, their democratic credentials have not always been questioned because of the consecutive incumbency of the same political party. Yet what is at stake in the Turkish case is the adoption of certain features of

competitive authoritarianism justified by the popular legitimacy of a dominant-party regime. Even riskier at this point are the calls by the government and by the President for a major institutional change, from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

And this was a country that seemed likely to eventually meet the Copenhagen Criteria back in 2005 when negotiations for accession to the EU were launched. A country that was held up as a role model for the Middle East when the Arab Spring began in 2010, as it was widely considered to exemplify the possible coexistence of Islam and democracy, defying Huntingtonian essentialism regarding the allegedly inherent constraints of 'Muslim civilisation' with respect to democratic regimes.¹ Numerous meetings were held, both in Turkey and beyond, to discuss the potential transfer of the 'Turkish model', bringing together intellectuals, civil society representatives and activists from Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere with their Turkish counterparts and, at times, Turkish government officials. Nonetheless, Turkey has since been demoted from democratic role model to a 'hybrid regime',² in which elections are held but liberties are restricted on a day-to-day basis.

Back in the good old days (only four or five years ago), strong economic indicators also upheld Turkey's suitability as a role model, since it was often identified as a rising star among the emerging markets, based on its impressive growth performance in the 2000s along with 'healthy' economic indicators. Paralleling the democratic deterioration, economic indicators have also become weaker. The country is currently considered one of the emerging markets trapped in middle income and marked by 'fragility'.³ Such a deterioration of both its democratic and economic status has coincided with the stagnation –or perhaps the virtual ending– of its EU accession process.

(1) Establishment of a dominant party regime in Turkey: playing the fear card – the recent elections and their aftermath

Held five months after the general elections in which the AKP lost its majority in parliament, the re-run elections of November 2015 brought a big surprise even to the AKP leaders who ostensibly 'attempted' to form a coalition government and failed to do so, and who simply framed their electoral campaign around the following threat: 'Vote for

¹ S.P. Huntington (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon&Schuster, New York.

² The concept of a 'hybrid regime' is used by several sources, often referring to different aspects of regimes which are neither fully-democratic nor fully-authoritarian. According to Diamond (2002, p. 24), 'virtually all hybrid regimes in the world today are quite deliberately *pseudo-democratic*, in that the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often, in part, to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination'. The 'Democracy Index' of the Economist Intelligence Unit groups regimes in four categories, one of which is that of 'hybrid regimes' where Turkey is currently placed alongside another 38 countries.

³ Amongst the large emerging markets which became the stars of the previous decade based on their high growth rates and relative resilience in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Brazil, Indonesia, India, South Africa and Turkey was grouped as the 'fragile five' due to their fairly large current account deficits and dependency on foreign capital inflows. Later, Mexico, Colombia, Malaysia, Russia and the Czech Republic were also added to the group. See Morgan Asset Management (2015), 'Breakout or Breakdown? Emerging Markets Strategy', August, http://www.jpmorganassetmanagement.lu/dms/Emerging_Markets_Strategy-Breakout_or_breakdown.pdf.

chaos –read ‘coalition’– or the AKP, it is up to you!’. The strategy of resorting to fear worked effectively, as hundreds of people had been killed between the two elections, 102 of them in a single attack by ISIL –although the government was reluctant to associate the attack directly with that entity–.⁴ Meanwhile, the ceasefire between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish State, which lasted for around two years, ended in July 2015, leading to the resumption of attacks by both sides and resulting in many casualties on a day-to-day basis. What is puzzling is that a government which clearly failed to prevent violence has been rewarded by 5 million additional votes, translating into an 8.6% rise for the AKP in only five months. The AKP government played the security card by implicitly threatening society with a greater instability that could possibly bring about civil war and a severe economic crisis.

Another apparent mystery is the decline in the ultra-nationalist vote represented by the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which in the past would tend to experience a boost whenever the PKK’s attacks intensified. Embracing a synthesis of nationalism and Islam, mostly tilted towards the former, the MHP lost around 4.4% of its votes in five months (from 16.3% to 11.9%), as it is widely argued that its constituency not only applauded Davutoğlu’s hawkish stance towards the PKK but also penalised its own leader, Bahçeli, who was reluctant to form a coalition with the AKP.⁵ Even though terrorist insurgency did not favour the MHP this time, the phenomenon of swing-voting within the right-wing bloc endured. In the November 2015 elections, the bloc received 61.4% of the vote, in line with a historical pattern where 60%-65% of the Turkish electorate has aligned with right-wing parties, increasingly clustering towards the far right since the mid-1990s; and swing-votes within this bloc have been a common phenomenon.⁶

Another factor behind the AKP’s increased vote share was a come-back from Kurdish votes that had gone to the Democratic Party of the Peoples (HDP), popularly known as the Kurdish Party despite its nationwide representation across different ethnic groups. Up until the June 2015 elections, the AKP was able to receive a considerable share of (especially religiously conservative) Kurdish votes in South-eastern Turkey, has many Kurdish-majority electoral districts. In June 2015 the HDP was able to capture some of those votes, contributing to it surpassing the 10% threshold for the first time in history. Yet the PKK’s ending of the cease-fire seems to have penalised the HDP, which lost around 1 million votes in five months, with its national vote share shrinking from 13.1% to 10.8%. In a milieu of fear regarding basic security and the economic future, some conservative Kurdish voters retreated from the HDP and again voted for the AKP.

The votes garnered by the Republican People’s Party (RPP), the main opposition party positioned in the centre-left, remained stable, with a slight increase from 25% to 25.3%.

⁴ P.M. Davutoğlu suggested that ‘Among those detained are people linked to the PKK and linked to Daesh [ISIL]’, alleging that it could be a joint operation between ISIL and the PKK, which are indeed fierce enemies of each other. See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/ankara-bombings-10-more-people-arrested-suspected-isis-pkk-links>.

⁵ Despite Davutoğlu’s offer, Bahçeli failed to negotiate the coalition.

⁶ See Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey, http://www.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/faces/Anasayfa.jspx?_afzLoop=2013854190633458&_afzWindowMode=0&_afzWindowId=null#%40%3F_afzWindowId%3Dnull%26_afzLoop%3D2013854190633458%26_afzWindowMode%3D0%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D1azjn1knrm_4.

Despite the party adopting a 'real' social-democratic programme after decades, the RPP was unable to carve out a greater niche, failing to break the majority right-wing bloc.

(1.1) Understanding the AKP's resilience

Although the AKP gets votes from many different groups, both urban and rural and across different income groups, the urban poor constitute an important share of its constituency. Mostly comprised of low-skilled labour, often incorporated into the workforce through the informal economy, this group is already on the far-right cluster with its religious conservatism and pronounced nationalism. Recent research shows that the group, which lacks organisation and access to the formal economy, is indifferent to some of the core components of democracy beyond electoral mechanisms, such as the rule of law, checks and balances, political rights and individual liberties.⁷ So far, there has been a 'happy symbiosis' between the AKP and these groups, not only based on their clustering towards the far-right end of the ideological spectrum.

In a rather utilitarian equilibrium, the AKP governments that pursued market-oriented economic policies, simultaneously adopted rather left-wing social policy instruments, the most important of which have been the extension of the social security system to universal coverage, reform of the health system to enable access to all hospitals (both public and private) by all people and social assistance programmes such as conditional cash transfers as in Latin America. All these measures increased the popularity of the AKP governments and contributed to the sustainability of support for the party. These groups sustained their allegiance to the AKP, partly fostered by the fear of losing certain benefits if the AKP were to be replaced by a different contender.⁸ In fact, the phenomenon is not limited to Turkey, since similar measures have contributed to the resilience of the incumbent in a number of other countries, even at the expense of accepting authoritarian regimes or practices. Conceptualised as 'responsive authoritarianism', the government's response to popular demands in even authoritarian contexts is rewarded by continued support for the entity in power.⁹

(1.2) Challenges posed by the recent elections

The recent electoral results pose considerable challenges for Turkish democracy, the most important of which is a probable establishment of presidentialism without adequate checks and balances, which might provide more space for authoritarian practices. President Erdoğan often makes reference to Latin American presidential systems and especially the Mexican variety, seemingly positing them as role models for Turkey. This, indeed, seems uncanny in a context where the problems of Latin American presidentialism are commonly discussed and some among them have lost their previous *de jure* and/or *de facto* power, given the consideration of the use of executive discretion

⁷ See A. Çarkoğlu & E. Kalaycıoğlu (2015), 'Citizenship in Turkey and the World' [Türkiye'de ve Dünyada Vatandaşlık], International Social Survey Program (ISSP).

⁸ See I. Özel & S. Parrado (forthcoming), 'Swimming Against the Tide: Expanding Social Welfare Regimes in the Emerging Markets'.

⁹ M. Dimitrov (2008), 'The Resilient Authoritarians', *Current History*, vol. 107, nr.705, p.24-29.

as a threat against democracy. Yet this long-awaited dream of Erdoğan requires a constitutional change, which would need 13 more deputies in the National Assembly, in addition to its current 317. There are two possibilities for the AKP: to convince at least one of the opposition parties by offering carrots, or to 'import' some of their deputies into the AKP's ranks –which has occurred several times in the history of the Turkish parliament–.¹⁰

Even if constitutional change is not possible, Plan B might be a sustained *status quo* whereby Erdoğan acts like a *de facto* president in a semi-presidential system.¹¹ Although there have been reactions even among the AKP rank-and-file against Erdoğan's undermining of the constitution (at times along with the authority of Prime Minister Davutoğlu), Erdoğan's widespread popularity might overrule such a critical stance. The structuring of the current cabinet has shown Erdoğan to be exceeding his constitutional boundaries by imposing his own list in the cabinet, rather than Davutoğlu's, thereby denoting his absolute hegemony over the AKP.

Hence, the issue at stake is not only presidentialism vs the parliamentary system but the risk of authoritarianism, which would potentially escalate with the establishment of the former. Increasing security concerns are particularly posed by two sources, the ISIS and the PKK, and already pave the way for further authoritarianism. Within a month of the elections –and pro-democratic post-election exhortations on the part of Davutoğlu to embrace all without tolerating polarisation–, the suppression of the media and of freedom of speech has continued, leading to the imprisonment of two more prominent critical journalists.

(1.3) Rising of a hybrid regime: the deterioration of Turkish democracy

The AKP governments have increasingly adopted various instruments of 'hybrid regimes' and 'competitive authoritarianism' in which competitive elections take place without adequately granting political rights and individual liberties, similarly to Russia and Venezuela, among other examples.¹² As in similar regimes, the continuing electoral process and the legitimacy acquired by the majority support for the AKP are used to mask the violations of basic liberties, thus qualifying Turkey as a 'hybrid regime'.¹³ In many other hybrid regimes, even the criteria of electoral democracy framed by a Schumpeterian minimalist conceptualisation (ie, fair, free and regular elections) are often jeopardised. Turkey's experience with electoral democracy has almost succumbed to this category since electoral politics have been tainted by a pervasive repression.

¹⁰ For electoral volatility, see Yasushi Hazama (2009), 'Economic Voting and Electoral Volatility in Turkish Provinces', Institute of Developing Economies, nr 202.

¹¹ See E. Özbudun (2012), 'Presidentialism vs. Parliamentarism in Turkey', Istituto Affari Internazionali, Policy Brief, nr. 1; and I. Özel (2014), *State-Business Alliances and Economic Development: Turkey, Mexico and North Africa*, Routledge, London & New York.

¹² S. Levitsky & L.A. Way (2010), *Competitive Authoritarianism, Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press.

¹³ L. Diamond (2002), 'Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, nr 2, p. 21-35.

The erosion in Turkish democracy has also been signalled by several democracy indices. Although the Polity-IV Index of the Center for Systemic Peace scores Turkey as 'democratic', both Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index, which rely on a more comprehensive understanding of democracy, underscore the recent deterioration in several aspects of democracy in Turkey. Categorising Turkey as 'partially free', Freedom House's evaluation shows a regression in civil liberties (from 3 in 2004 to 4 in 2014), pinpointing the suppression of the media and of freedom of expression, while the EIU groups Turkey with the 'hybrid regimes', pointing out a number of dimensions in which liberties have been substantially constrained in the past few years.¹⁴

Although the recent elections reveal the relative weakness of the opposition parties, the AKP's 'success' should be evaluated carefully through a filter of repression that obstructs the fairness of the electoral playing field. Opposition parties, particularly the HDP, were subject to considerable repression before the elections, and where freedom of speech and media is increasingly restricted, even free and fair elections, constituting only the minimal standards of democracy, are subject to contestation.

Tensions and pressing issues in the foreign policy realm further feed into authoritarian tendencies, as most of the issues are framed as security concerns by the AKP government. The following section examines some of the central issues in that realm.

(2) Foreign policy: the refugee crisis and Turkey's precarious role

Turkey's role in the refugee crisis was relatively unrecognised until the summer of 2015, when an influx of refugees began to arrive in Europe, creating much contention in many countries. Only recently has Turkey emerged as a key actor in the refugee crisis, even though it has hosted the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, brought about by its 'Open Door Policy' in effect since 2011 and its lengthy border with Syria. Of the total 2.2 million Syrians in Turkey, only around 300,000 live in 27 refugee camps, with the rest residing in cities throughout the country, some of which host over half a million. Obviously, the refugee influx has been highly challenging given the need to provide health, education and other services in addition to jobs for a group as large as the population of a small country. Currently, around 450,000 Syrian students are enrolled in Turkish schools and there are many who are not. Most Syrians have been incorporated into the workforce through the informal economy, driving wages down in many urban centres and engendering severe tensions in the labour market. Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the Turkish government has spent around US\$7.6 billion.¹⁵ In addition to the government's efforts, civil society has played an important role in providing aid and cooperation with the local and central authorities in the reception of the large number of refugees, especially in the provinces close to the Syrian border. In some provinces, civil

¹⁴ See Freedom House (2015), 'Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist, Freedom in the World 2015', Annual Report; Economist Intelligence Unit (2015), 'Democracy Index 2014: Democracy and its discontents'.

¹⁵ For the declaration of the Turkish government, see Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş's statement at <http://www.haberturk.com/ekonomi/para/haber/1130090-kurtulmus-suriyelilere-7-6-milyar-dolar-harcadik>.

society actors have formed umbrella organisations to coordinate humanitarian action involving many players.

In October 2015 the EU embarked on a new action plan to cooperate with Turkey and to 'share the burden', so that the refugees would be 'contained' in Turkey, impeding their passage to Europe. This plan entails cost and information sharing between the parties, as well as strengthening Turkey's capacity to control smuggling. The EU offered €3 billion in exchange for Turkey's cooperation and embellished the offer with a perfect enticement: the prospect of faster progress in Turkey's bid to join the EU, conditional on Turkey doing its homework to contain refugees on its own soil along with accepting those rejected by Europe. Although Turkey's proposal for establishing a 'safe zone' in northern Syria, near the Turkish border, does not seem to resonate with the EU, Merkel's offer to resume Turkey's accession process –which has been pretty much on ice for a number of years– by accelerating the procedures on visa-free travel to the EU for Turkish citizens, has generated considerable interest in Turkey. It remains to be seen what will come of the offer.

(2.1) When the enemy becomes the allies' hero: Kurds fighting ISIL

Unmistakably, one of the greatest challenges for Turkey in the current environment is ISIL, whose headquarters are close to Turkey's border. The Turkish government has been accused on the basis of allegations on several fronts, the mildest of which is turning a blind eye towards ISIL and especially its fighters crossing Turkish soil in their ongoing trek towards Europe. At the other end of the range of allegations, there is the recent claim made by Russia that the Turkish state is not only monitoring the oil trade conducted by ISIL but actively taking part in it.

Allegations aside, there is the obvious 'pragmatic' conundrum in that ISIL and Turkey have a common enemy: the Kurdish groups that have fought against ISIL in northern Syria, given that some of these groups also take part in or provide support for the Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), within Turkey's borders. As the peace process ended in a new spate of violence in July 2015, the Turkish State is currently at war with the PKK's insurgency. To complicate matters, however, the links between the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the PKK are well known, and the PYD has the vocal support of the US and several other countries in the West, as do the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), which are considered the 'only effective forces fighting against ISIL' along with the Peshmerga of northern Iraq. Although geographically situated outside Turkey's borders, the PYD not only aims for democratic autonomy for the Kurdish people but neither does it hide its hostility towards Turkey for the denial of Kurdish rights in general and the continuing imprisonment of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan by the Turkish State. Announcing the foundation of Syrian Kurdistan in 2013, often referred to as Western Kurdistan, the PYD is considered a legitimate democratic entity which has, in fact, established a *de facto* state in Rojava, where it collects taxes, provides public services, operates security forces and implements some of the principles of Öcalan in its statehood practices.

Although turning a blind eye to the rise of the ISIL and its links with several hubs of radical Islam within Turkey are often read as a signal of further Islamisation of the Turkish

government and its support for such networks (and the greater ideal of Sunni dominance in the region, entrenched against the so-called 'Shia axis' between Iran, Iraq and Syria), the Kurdish challenge, which is the common denominator of the Turkish State and ISIL, needs to be taken into account when interpreting the complicated matrix of actors in and around Syria.

(2.2) Yet another external conflict: Russian-Turkish relations

Russia and Turkey, flexing their muscles over a geostrategic power struggle which has recently centred around the Syrian crisis, appear to be in the throes of a renewed rise in their historical rivalry. Having fought 13 wars in the past, these once major empires seeking to expand their influence over the neighbourhood are getting into a muddle in the wake of the Russian jet crisis which broke out on 24 November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian jet based on the claim that it had violated Turkish airspace. Even though Turkey has since proved its claim, with US confirmation, relations between the two countries are in dire straits. What is puzzling here is the timing of the act and the consequent crisis –and the bold reaction on the part of a NATO member–, after all, this is not the first time that Russian jets have violated Turkish air-space.

Leading to an apology crisis, the incident caused some serious turbulence in Turkish–Russian relations. Within a week after the incident, Russian state officials made accusations not only concerning the AKP government's turning a blind eye towards the IS, but also its direct support for –and benefits through– the IS via multiple channels, most importantly the purchase of ISIL oil. President Putin went a step further and alleged that President Erdoğan and his family were directly involved in the transactions.¹⁶ Endorsed by Iran, the claims caused a major shock in the international arena, as well as within Turkey.

The severe tension between the two countries with egocentric and eccentric leaders has already borne tangible economic consequences. Russia announced a series of economic sanctions on Turkey in international trade and tourism, to harm Turkish business interests while exacerbating Turkey's current account deficit problem. Turkey attracts around 4.5 million Russian tourists (2014 data) and the trade volume between the two countries had reached around US\$50 million (2013). In the context of this recently launched trade war, Russia already imposed sanctions on imports from Turkey in various sectors, including food and vegetables, besides its threats regarding energy-related agreements already signed between the two countries (Turkey is the second largest buyer of Russian gas).

Although Russia and Turkey had been rivals during the Cold War, rapprochement between the two began before the end of the Cold War. The 'Agreement on Natural Gas' signed in 1984 was the turning point in expanding economic links which went beyond energy exports from Russia to Turkey, to include exports of a wide range of products as well as capital from Turkey to Russia. As early as the late 1980s, Turkish construction companies had begun to carve out a substantial share of the Russian market. Signed in 1992, Black Sea Economic Cooperation promised expansion of economic links between

¹⁶ For the allegations see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34982951>.

the two markets. In the last three decades, the Turkish business presence in the Russian market has expanded, paralleling the increased volumes of trade and new commitments to cooperate further in the future in highly strategic ventures including Rosatom establishing a nuclear power station in Turkey by 2020. In 2014, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the two countries to build a new pipeline to carry Russian gas to Turkey and then Europe, Turkish Stream Project, replacing the South Stream Project with the EU.

Nevertheless, the warming-up between the two countries has not impeded tensions. Whenever Turkey wanted to magnify its role in the region in the post-Soviet geo-strategic context, be it in Caucasia or Central Asia, it invariably hit a wall as Russia stopped its influence. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey wanted to act as a “big-brother” for the Central Asian Turkic Republics, yet this urge was plainly blocked by Russia. Later in the 1990s, Turkey wanted to play a role in Chechnia and Abkhazia, but was again blocked. Having learned a lesson, Turkey did not meddle in the conflicts in Ukraine and Crimea, despite its re-emerging urge to “protect” the Muslim communities in geographies where it once ruled. Having rejected inclusion in the EU’s economic sanctions in response to the crisis in Ukraine, Turkey expanded its economic interactions with Russia after the crisis.

Another major conflict, emerged in the 1990s, concerns energy routes and the negotiations around them between multiple actors including the EU, Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Aimed at becoming a central energy corridor to transport Caucasian oil and gas to the European markets, bypassing Russia in energy transport, Turkey wholeheartedly supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC) which would link Caucasian energy to European markets. In clashing with Russian interests regarding control over energy corridors, the BTC (and its endorsement by the US) caused severe tensions between Turkey and Russia.

Although showing their muscles to each other on multiple occasions, the two countries have gone through a rapprochement in the 2000s based on a utilitarian equilibrium and converging at an important intersection: Their egocentric leaders have often defied the West and applauded one another for their boldness. Yet, such appreciation does not necessarily alleviate the power struggle between the two.

(2.3) Turkey’s arduous journey to the EU

One might suggest that the Turkish government has too many things on its plate right now, such that the EU is not necessarily a priority. Yet the EU’s loss of priority could very well be the consequence of the frustrating negotiating process for both parties. As Merkel’s visit and the subsequent commitments to cooperation in the refugee crisis have clearly shown, the successive Turkish governments have changed their discourse regarding the EU process and have become wholehearted supporters of it in response to positive directions provided by EU representatives –and this despite the fact that in the last seven or eight years the discourse has tilted considerably towards the direction in which the EU was not deemed to be an important goal–.

Turkey's long journey started 52 years ago when the Ankara Treaty was signed between the European Economic Community and Turkey in 1963, setting up the conditions for a Customs Union Agreement between the parties along with further cooperation. Following the signing of the Customs Union Agreement in 1995, Turkey was announced as an eligible candidate in 1999, and negotiations were finally launched in 2005. The most important democratic (and some economic, albeit under the guidance of other actors) reforms within the broad range of normalisation of civil–military relations, protection of minority rights, human rights and abolition of the death penalty, among many others, were carried out between 1999 and 2005, indicating the importance of the EU anchor in Turkey's democratic reforms. Nevertheless, as soon as the negotiations were launched stagnation set in, as not only has political will for reforms weakened, but also many of the chapters of the *acquis* have been blocked. So far, of the total 35 chapters, 14 have been opened (due to blocking by some members) and only one has been closed.

This 'anchor–credibility dilemma' depicts the double-edged nature of the frustration between the two parties: when reforms slow down, the candidate country loses credibility; in response the EU shows a lower level of willingness to proceed with negotiations; as a result the candidate loses its will to reform further and the EU loses its anchoring capacity.¹⁷ As in all vicious cycles, it is hard to discern a first actor. If this dilemma can be resolved, the EU trajectory may well re-open and proceed. Thus, the much-needed democratic reforms could be implemented and the current reversal of democratic consolidation (often tainted by authoritarian tendencies) could be stopped. In that case, we might be able to come up with much more optimistic scenarios, as a vicious cycle of deterioration might turn into a virtuous cycle, as in the case of the AKP's first tenure. Such a scenario is certainly not impossible.

Conclusions

In this challenging context, various readings of Turkish politics are possible. The stability of the government –supported by the political preferences of many in Turkish society– seems to stand against the tide of instability in the region, and hence it might be perceived as a positive development in itself. Nonetheless, digging into both the dynamics (including the overt threats) behind that stability, increasing polarisation in society and the cost of overall corrosion in democratic standards (using the legitimacy of popularity for authoritarian measures) might easily engender pessimistic perceptions of Turkish politics and its probable trajectory in the near future. This paper has tried to shed light on some of these different readings as to the current state of Turkish politics as well as of Turkish foreign policy.

¹⁷ See M. Uğur (1999), *The European Union and Turkey: An Anchor/Credibility Dilemma*, Ashgate.