



POLICY BRIEF

The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West

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Turkey was once a beacon of democratic consolidation in a volatile neighborhood, but its authoritarian turn is straining relations with key partners in the West.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After nearly two decades of rule in Turkey by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the initial promise of reform has given way to authoritarian and dysfunctional politics. The democratic and economic achievements of the AKP's early years helped launch membership negotiations with the European Union (EU) and made Turkey a model for neighboring states undergoing reforms. However, this positive picture did not last long: Democratic gains eroded, economic growth stalled, EU accession ground to a halt, and relations with most neighbors grew acrimonious.

In this paper, the authors identify internal and external drivers that contributed to democratic backsliding in Turkey. On the domestic side, the country has a political culture that is willing to accept “big man” rule, feels less attached to core civil liberties associated with liberal democracy (such as

freedom of expression and media), and has become more conservative and less tolerant of diversity. Erdoğan's abandonment of inclusive politics in favor of exclusionary policies further aggravated Turkey's societal polarization along conservative-religious and secular-progressive lines, complicating efforts to defend shared democratic values. Erdoğan used the government's response to the July 2016 coup attempt, which all political parties rejected as an assault on the country's democracy, to crush remaining opposition. The transformation of Turkey's decades-old parliamentary system into a heavily centralized presidential one further removed checks and balances.

Among external factors, the botched EU accession process contributed to Turkey's democratic regression. Destabilizing regional developments, especially in Syria, also played a role. In particular, domestic politics were adversely affected by the arrival of over 3.5 million Syrian refugees, attacks

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in Turkish cities by the Islamic State (ISIS), and the collapse of the ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The paper also examines the consequences of increasingly authoritarian rule in Turkey. It has weakened the governance structures of state institutions, harmed the previously strong economy, and contributed to the prioritization of nationalist concerns in foreign policymaking.

As the political situation is unlikely to improve in the near term, the paper concludes that relations between Turkey and the trans-Atlantic community will remain strained for the foreseeable future. The paper encourages these countries to retain a long-term perspective given Turkey's geostrategic importance to the West as well as their current political, security, socio-economic, and cultural integration with Turkey. In the short term, they should continue addressing respective security concerns, adopt policies that encourage rule of law improvements, and engage Turkish civil society. In addition, regional organizations such as NATO, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) should actively engage Turkey in support of shared trans-Atlantic values.

INTRODUCTION

When Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002, there were high hopes in the West about progress in this predominantly Muslim country on democratic governance, minority rights, and economic reform. In the aftermath of 9/11, Western leaders had welcomed Erdoğan's statement that "I do not subscribe to the view that Islamic culture and democracy cannot be reconciled."¹ These positive developments also inspired Turkey's neighbors, who were keen to emulate its experience after the Arab Spring uprisings. Given Turkey's strategic importance and economic potential, the European Union and United States sought to bring

the country closer to the trans-Atlantic fold; this included launching EU accession negotiations in October 2005 and efforts by then-U.S. President Barack Obama to forge a "model partnership."² Yet despite the promise of early reforms, Turkey's politics have grown increasingly authoritarian and dysfunctional. This policy brief discusses the weakening of Turkey's democratic institutions, internal and external factors that contributed to this backsliding, and the political and economic effect of these negative trends; it also addresses how the trans-Atlantic community should respond.

CHALLENGES TO TURKEY'S DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Increasing powers of the president

Although it is difficult to determine a particular date when Erdoğan's authoritarianism became evident, the government's brutal reaction to the Gezi Park protests in May 2013 was a critical turning point. The demonstrations, described by one political scientist as "the biggest spontaneous revolt in Turkish history," began as peaceful opposition to the urban development plan for an Istanbul park.³ Additional protests and strikes developed across Turkey in response to the violent crackdown by police as well as broader concerns about the government's growing interference in citizens' lives, including limiting freedom of the press, expression, and assembly. Amid differences within his cabinet about how to respond, Erdoğan used the opportunity to purge more liberal AKP members.⁴ This included then-President Abdullah Gül, who preferred a more conciliatory approach toward the protesters.⁵ Erdoğan denied him the possibility to return to the party ranks after his presidential term ended in August 2014. Erdoğan put himself forward as a candidate for Turkey's first direct presidential election—enabled by an October 2007 constitutional referendum amending the previous procedure whereby parliament elected the president—and articulated a clear agenda to shift to a presidential system.

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By subsequently winning the 2014 election with 52 percent of the vote, Erdoğan believed he represented the will of the electorate.⁶ He chose former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as prime minister and caretaker party leader. However, Erdoğan dismissed him in May 2016 due to his reluctance to support Erdoğan's ambition to end the parliamentary system, his willingness to entertain a coalition government after the AKP lost its majority in the June 2015 elections, and his opposition to various policy reforms.⁷ Erdoğan replaced him with Binali Yıldırım, a loyalist who was prepared to facilitate the constitutional amendments needed to transform the political system.

Another important turning point in the consolidation of presidential power resulted from the attempted military coup of July 2016, which the Turkish government quickly blamed on officers and civilians associated with Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric and the spiritual leader of a transnational religious movement known as "Hizmet" (translated from Turkish as "service").⁸ Gülen worked with Erdoğan after the AKP was elected in order to rid the government and military of the Kemalists and secularists, whom they believed operated a "deep state."⁹ The placement of Gülenists in senior positions across the Turkish government helped ensure internal support.

Following their successful joint effort to weaken bureaucratic resistance to a more Islamist agenda, Erdoğan and Gülen began jostling for power in 2011. They launched an escalating series of attacks and counterattacks: Erdoğan refused to include dozens of Gülenists on AKP lists for parliamentary elections and shut down Gülenist prep schools (used for fundraising and recruitment); Gülenist police and prosecutors launched corruption investigations that implicated government ministers and Erdoğan's family members; the government closed Gülenist newspapers and television stations, seized companies belonging to Gülen's supporters, and purged hundreds of government officials.¹⁰ These reciprocal measures had the effect of weakening civil society.

Despite growing resentment over Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies, all political parties and the majority of Turkish civil society nevertheless rejected the coup as an assault on Turkey's democracy.¹¹ However, Erdoğan viewed the failed putsch as a "gift from God" and used new powers obtained through the state of emergency to crush remaining opposition.¹²

The formal consolidation of Erdoğan's de facto presidential rule began on April 16, 2017, when Turkish citizens voted in a constitutional referendum on a package of measures that shifted the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one.¹³ These reforms eliminated the office of prime minister and enabled the president to serve as head of the ruling party. They gave new powers to the president, including the right to issue decrees, propose the national budget, appoint cabinet ministers and high-level bureaucrats without a confidence vote from parliament, and appoint more than half the members of the high courts. Experts at the Venice Commission and elsewhere expressed concern about insufficient checks and balances, given excessive concentration of power in one office, limited parliamentary oversight, and a weakening of judicial independence.¹⁴

Erdoğan became the first head of this new system in July 2018, after he won snap elections and installed his "enhanced presidency."¹⁵ As a result, the taste of relatively liberal democracy that Turkey experienced in the early days of AKP rule has largely disappeared. Whatever democracy remains will be Erdoğan-style *demokrasi*, characterized by populism, majoritarianism, and a mixture of Islam and intolerant Turkish nationalism.¹⁶ The deep polarization between his supporters and opponents further enables him to perpetuate an illiberal political agenda.¹⁷

Weak opposition

The governing AKP enjoys a solid conservative religious base of around 35 percent, which provides consistent support at the ballot box. Until

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recently, the party was also closely associated with unprecedented improvements in public services and economic performance. In contrast, Turkey's opposition parties have suffered from internal weaknesses and failed to provide a compelling alternative. Erdoğan's repressive policies and tight control of the media have further hindered opposition efforts to promote their policies to the electorate and compete on a level playing field.

The People's Republican Party (CHP), led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has been out of government since 1995 and riddled with internal divisions. It has struggled to develop an attractive political program and mobilize a meaningful base beyond its traditional supporters, rarely winning more than 25 percent of the national vote. This trend continued in the June 2018 parliamentary elections, with CHP receiving less than 23 percent. Its presidential candidate Muharrem İnce ran a surprisingly successful campaign and received more than 30 percent of the vote, a performance unheard of for a CHP politician since the 1970s. Yet İnce has failed to wrest control of the party, as entrenched interests favor Kılıçdaroğlu and limit the ability of reformers to develop a more dynamic agenda.¹⁸

The head of the ultra-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, initiated the legislative process leading to the adoption of the constitutional amendments advocated by Erdoğan; in early January 2018, he announced his party would unconditionally support Erdoğan in the next presidential election. The MHP did unexpectedly well in parliamentary elections, winning 49 seats that have given Bahçeli some leverage over Erdoğan. Meral Akşener, a former minister of the interior in the 1990s, broke with MHP and launched İyi Parti (Good Party). Although her fledgling party won 43 seats in the parliament, she did poorly in the presidential polls with only 7 percent of the vote. Like İnce, she does not have a seat in the parliament. Contrary to initial speculation, she has managed to hold her party together thus far.

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) achieved impressive electoral success in June 2015. After running a campaign that openly challenged Erdoğan's leadership style and authoritarianism, it passed for the first time the 10 percent threshold to enter parliament. As its election denied the AKP a parliamentary majority, Erdoğan dragged his feet on coalition formation. Meanwhile, spillover from the conflict in neighboring Syria contributed to the resumption of violence weeks after the election between Turkish security forces and the PKK, a designated terrorist organization engaged for decades in armed conflict with the Turkish state.¹⁹ When new elections were held in November 2015, the HDP lost seats and the AKP restored its majority.²⁰ With the introduction of emergency rule and the broadening of the anti-terror law after the coup attempt, HDP's co-leaders (Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ), 10 parliamentarians, and dozens of elected mayors were arrested on terrorism charges. Demirtaş ran an electoral campaign from prison, receiving just over 8 percent of the vote while the HDP attracted liberal voters to win 67 seats in the parliament. However, Erdoğan's virulent campaign against the HDP—which associated the party with the PKK and terrorism—cost the party its conservative Kurdish voters and undermined its ability to represent the more diverse, secular, and liberal face of Turkey.

Questionable elections

Although Turkey had a record of free and fair elections since 1950, there have been questions about the conduct of recent polls. In the run-up to the June and November 2015 general elections, Erdoğan disregarded constitutional stipulations against partisan activity by a sitting president and the opposition complained about limited access to state media (as well as general media mostly controlled by the government). This problem persisted before the April 2017 referendum, as government use of state resources led the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to report that "the line between State and party [had become] blurred."²¹

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Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) dramatically reinterpreted Turkey's election bylaws, as it allowed unstamped ballots to be considered valid unless they were proven to be fraudulent.²² With a very tight referendum result (51 percent in favor of the constitutional amendments versus 49 percent against the proposed changes), there were accusations that this ruling enabled ballot box stuffing.²³ Prior to presidential and parliamentary elections in June 2018, the electoral law was amended to incorporate the YSK ruling and to allow the relocation of ballot boxes. The snap elections were held under emergency rule, limiting opposition parties' ability to campaign and assemble freely.

Erosion of rule of law

Since the coup attempt, Turkey's rule of law has been systematically dismantled. In order to reassert control, the government quickly declared a state of emergency. Yet its repeated extension, draconian provisions (e.g., police could hold individuals in pre-trial detention for 30 days without charges), and limited mechanisms to refute false charges had a chilling effect on public opposition. The government's elastic definition of what constitutes "terrorism" altered the bounds of what is politically permissible, as acceptable actions one day were later deemed unacceptable, with retroactive consequences. These measures narrowed space for dissent, shrunk press freedom, and diminished confidence in state institutions. Although the state of emergency was lifted in July 2018, the AKP introduced new anti-terror legislation that bolsters government authority and is equally oppressive.²⁴

Freedom House classified Turkey as "not free" in its "Freedom in the World 2018" report, the first time since the series began in 1999. Its report notes "a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, the mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrary prosecutions of rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued purges of state employees, all of which have left citizens hesitant to express their views on sensitive topics."²⁵

In addition, media freedom has also come under attack. This is not a new phenomenon in Turkey, as previous governments had imposed restrictions on the press,²⁶ but there was a marked improvement when the AKP first came to power and introduced EU-mandated reforms. This changed in 2007, when the AKP's Gülenist allies in the police and judiciary began detaining journalists (along with academics, judges, officers, and prosecutors) on trumped up charges.²⁷ As the feud between Erdoğan and Gülenists escalated in 2013, journalists associated with Gülenist media outlets were also detained. The situation worsened after the coup attempt and introduction of emergency rule.

With the exception of a few minor media outlets, pro-government establishments dominate the Turkish media scene. One of the government's favorite tactics involves compelling pro-AKP businesspeople to purchase media outlets, leading to the dismissal of journalists and the adoption of editorial lines that support the party's positions.²⁸ The government has blocked social media and other websites, including Wikipedia and Twitter, and prosecuted people for their postings.²⁹ Turkey also has the dubious distinction of being the world's top jailer of journalists.³⁰ Many reporters have faced charges for reporting on security measures and the PKK, though Erdoğan claims no journalists have been detained for reasons to do with their profession.³¹

DRIVERS OF DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

Cultural factors

There are numerous internal and external factors that have contributed to Turkey's shift from being a promising democracy to its increasing authoritarianism. For instance, willingness to accept "big man" rule has long been a feature of Turkish political culture.³² Despite decades of experience with electoral democracy, public opinion surveys suggest citizens are less attached to the civil liberties associated with liberal democracy

(such as freedom of expression and media).³³ Over the last decade, the Turkish public has become more conservative in its political preferences and less tolerant of diversity.³⁴

Although Turkey experienced significant democratic reforms and a relatively liberal political climate during Erdoğan's first decade in power, he eventually abandoned his inclusive politics in favor of exclusionary and repressive ones.³⁵ He presented himself as a leader representing the national will and adopted an identity-driven narrative that emphasized Islam and Turkish nationalism.³⁶ He portrayed his opponents as traitors and collaborators of external forces seeking to undermine Turkey's prosperity and stability. Given public support for stability and order over democratic freedoms, this narrative found a receptive audience.³⁷ It further deepened Turkey's societal polarization along conservative-religious and secular-progressive lines, complicating efforts to defend shared democratic values.

Botched European Union accession

The prospect of Turkish membership in the European Union helped motivate Erdoğan to introduce liberal reforms. Yet as the EU dragged its feet on the process, Ankara's enthusiasm for further reforms waned.³⁸ The clear preference by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel for a "privileged partnership" harmed Turkish domestic opinion. The EU's 2006 decision to block new negotiating chapters after Ankara failed to recognize the Republic of Cyprus was particularly frustrating for many Turks. Turkey had supported a U.N. plan to reunify the island in April 2004; although Turkish Cypriots voted for the plan in a referendum, Greek Cypriots rejected it but still received EU membership.

As Turkey's expectation of EU accession dropped, so did its political commitment to the EU project. This coincided with Europe's economic pains during the 2008 financial crisis and a concurrent boom in the Turkish economy, which gave Erdoğan confidence in

pursuing his own path and staffing his government with euroskeptics who were more conservative and Islamist.³⁹ The situation became further aggravated when the EU failed to understand the coup attempt and express prompt solidarity with Turkey's democratically elected leadership,⁴⁰ enabling Erdoğan to adopt an increasingly nationalist and anti-EU discourse. Ironically, these developments have precluded the EU from opening negotiating chapters in the areas needed the most: rule of law and civil liberties.

Middle East turmoil

Destabilizing regional developments in recent years have played a role in Turkey's authoritarian drift. Until the Arab Spring, the Turkish government maintained pragmatic and cooperative relations with all Middle Eastern countries (including Israel) through its "zero problems with neighbors" policy. Erdoğan and his advisors, especially then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, long believed the West encouraged nationalism to divide and rule Muslims.⁴¹ They hailed the popular uprisings as an opportunity for a "grand restoration" of Islamic civilization and envisioned Turkey becoming "the spokesperson of the Islamic world in the international system."⁴² The government departed from Turkey's traditional policy of non-interference in the domestic politics of its neighbors, instead playing an active role in the affairs of Arab countries experiencing rebellions and supporting the Syrian opposition's efforts to overthrow the Bashar Assad regime.⁴³

Syria has been particularly destabilizing for Turkey, both domestically and regionally.⁴⁴ First, Erdoğan's desire to see Assad overthrown led to lax enforcement of border controls, which enabled easy movement of foreign fighters and led to increasing Western condemnation. When Turkey became a target of ISIS attacks, the country's stability, tourism, and economic performance were undermined while polarization grew between the more secular and religiously conservative parts of society.

Second, Kurdish dynamics in Syria had a spillover effect on Turkey's domestic politics. The government's reluctance to help Syrian Kurds during the fall 2014 siege by the Islamic State on Kobane—a predominantly Kurdish town in Syria near the Turkish border—hurt relations with its own Kurds (with whom Erdoğan was engaged in a peace process). These tensions culminated in a breakdown of the peace process and escalation of violence between Turkish security forces and the PKK. Turkish relations with the United States suffered amid American cooperation with a faction of Syrian Kurdish fighters (the People's Protection Units, YPG), which the government saw as an extension of the PKK, in the fight against ISIS in northeastern Syria.⁴⁵ Erdoğan has used Turkish military action in Syria to counter YPG territorial aspirations and American support for the group, as well as to whip up nationalist sentiment and consolidate his repressive policies.

Finally, the arrival of over 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey strained the provision of public services, challenged municipalities' ability to cope with influxes of refugees into urban centers, and provoked growing resentment among the public.⁴⁶ The government has struggled to balance efforts to return refugees to Syria, the reality of their continued presence in Turkey, and the need to retain electoral support.

Post-coup crackdown

As discussed earlier in this paper, some of the most egregiously authoritarian measures were enacted in response to the July 2016 coup attempt. Although the government understandably needed to address an internal threat, the large-scale security operation to arrest suspected coup plotters quickly devolved into a maximalist purge of affiliated Gülenists and an apparent witch hunt against all political opponents. The government summarily sacked an unprecedented number of public sector employers, including academics, health workers, judges, military officers, schoolteachers, security

personnel, prosecutors, and others.⁴⁷ Mechanisms to aid those who believe they were wrongfully purged are understaffed and slow-moving.⁴⁸ The government also used the state of emergency to curtail freedoms of press and assembly.

DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY CONSEQUENCES

Weakened governance in state institutions

Increasing authoritarianism has weakened Turkey's governance structures, hurt its previously strong economy, and adversely affected its foreign policymaking. For instance, the presidential system adopted by the April 2017 referendum and implemented in July 2018 is reshaping Turkish state institutions.⁴⁹ The president has the sole authority to appoint and dismiss high-level civil servants; previously, they were appointed by decrees that required the consent of the prime minister as well as the relevant minister. The president now enjoys almost total control over judicial appointments, limiting courts' ability to provide checks and balances on the executive. There is also markedly less judicial independence: Lower courts ignore rulings by the constitutional court, state employees are dismissed without cause, property belonging to persons implicated in the coup attempt has been arbitrarily confiscated, and appeal procedures are limited.

Secondary education is in severe crisis, as the government has given İmam Hatip schools (which prepare young men to be imams) more prominence in response to Erdoğan's call for educating "pious generations."⁵⁰ Critics argue this approach fails to meet 21st century economic needs and weakens Turkey's traditionally secular and modern education.⁵¹ Erdoğan has brought universities under his direct control by ending the tradition of state universities selecting their own rectors, curtailing academic freedoms, and dismissing thousands of academics after the coup attempt.

The Turkish military has been severely weakened, including by post-coup purges of its senior leadership, and has lost its traditional influence in state affairs.⁵² The leadership has become subservient to Erdoğan, who appointed the former chief of general as the defense minister in his first presidential cabinet. The new system also empowers the president to manage military promotions, which the military previously did itself.⁵³ In addition, the police have been equipped with heavy arms, brought under closer control of the government, and required to adopt religious practices departing from prior secular ones. Erdoğan has encouraged youth paramilitary groups and adopted a law absolving civilians who used violence against the military during the coup attempt.⁵⁴

A struggling economy

Turkey's economic health will remain a domestic challenge. The value of the Turkish lira (TL) in American dollars depreciated from 2.15TL after Erdoğan's first presidential election in August 2014 to 4.70TL at his re-election in June 2018.⁵⁵ The economy further suffered in August 2018, with the lira reaching a record low of 7.24TL per dollar, after the United States doubled steel and aluminum tariffs and sanctioned two Turkish ministers amid growing frustration over the detention of an American pastor on spurious terrorism charges.⁵⁶ Year-on-year inflation reached a 15-year high of nearly 22 percent in December 2018, well above the government target.⁵⁷

Turkish leaders frequently note the country's impressive GDP growth rate, which was 7.4 percent in 2017. However, the economy has been sustained by government spending, reliance on the construction sector, and cheap credit that boosts consumption.⁵⁸ There are structural weaknesses, including large current accounts deficits, an external debt stock (of over half the country's GDP, with 70 percent belonging to the private sector), and growing unemployment (averaging 11.6 percent in October 2018).⁵⁹ The Turkish economy

is also heavily dependent on trade and foreign direct investment, primarily from the EU. However, government data show that foreign investment was down 16 percent in 2017 from the previous year;⁶⁰ it increased slightly in 2018.⁶¹

These trends should worry Erdoğan, particularly given his reliance on pocketbook politics that have led some economically successful Turks to ignore his illiberal policies.⁶² The country's poor economic performance is generally seen as the reason he called snap elections in June 2018 rather than waiting for the scheduled date of November 2019. He continues to face a contradiction between his economic and political interests: His tendency to attack Europe and the United States rhetorically to rally his nationalist base dissuades the investors needed to fuel Turkey's economic success. Declining rule of law (including weakened due process and judicial independence), growing xenophobia, and an unpredictable political environment also concern prospective investors.

Nationalistic and centralized foreign policymaking

The government's foreign policy decisions are increasingly driven by the need to maintain support among the nationalist base. This was particularly evident before June 2018 elections in measures that increased tension with Greece over the Aegean Sea, military action against U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish fighters, and negative rhetoric against the European Union. The government's reluctance to criticize Russia and Iran for their policies in Syria, which is a pragmatic decision amid a difficult geopolitical situation, prevents his base from forming a balanced view of friend and foe.

Although the Turkish government recognizes its economic dependence on the EU and vulnerability to Russia absent the NATO security umbrella, its actions increasingly fail to live up to the democratic standards and values of these institutions.

Turkey's foreign policy instruments have also evolved. Under the new political system, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has lost its traditional influence over the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Erdoğan has instead formed his own foreign policy team at the presidential palace and can appoint ministry personnel and ambassadors at will (including individuals without prior diplomatic experience).⁶³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the unlikely prospect of near-term improvements in Turkey's democratic trajectory, Ankara's relations with the trans-Atlantic community will remain strained for the foreseeable future. Turkey is a policy conundrum for Western policymakers because its problematic leadership faces genuine threats, which require its frustrated partners to navigate the gray zone.⁶⁴ Given that the main beneficiaries of frayed ties are those who do not want to see Turkey facing West, it is important to preserve the possibility of better relations in the future. The degree of political, security, socio-economic, and cultural integration necessitates a nuanced style of relationship management. It is also worth remembering that nearly half of Turkish voters do not support the country's current direction. At the same time, there are limited tools available to influence Turkish behavior. The democratic regression in several EU member states, a polarizing American president averse to expressing support for rule of law and human rights, and a widening trans-Atlantic rift have weakened Western influence.

The United States

U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations have become increasingly fraught in recent years. Ankara questions whether the United States takes seriously its security concerns, noting the government's failure to extradite alleged coup plotter Fetullah Gülen from the United States and American military cooperation with the YPG in Syria.⁶⁵ Washington

asks whether Turkey is a reliable ally, citing its plans to purchase Russian military equipment and its detention of U.S. citizens and Turkish employees of U.S. consulates.⁶⁶ The Trump administration sought to improve the atmosphere with a series of high-level meetings and restrained an increasingly frustrated Congress that sought to mandate punitive measures.⁶⁷ Tensions spiked in August 2018, when the United States imposed sanctions and tariffs that led Turkey to free a wrongfully imprisoned American pastor.⁶⁸ The sides faced renewed tensions in December 2018, following Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, raising questions about the YPG's future. Many of these issues will continue plaguing the relationship.

Despite these challenges, U.S. policy should take care to prioritize the longer-term potential of the relationship. Turkey's strategic geography, NATO membership, and centrality to U.S. regional objectives require continued engagement. The executive and legislative branches should continue engaging their counterparts on respective concerns and cooperating in areas of shared interest (including counterterrorism and Syria). Yet the United States should also widen the aperture beyond security issues, including expanding people-to-people ties, supporting civil society, and using the prospect of deeper trade and investment links to encourage better governance. It should also keep rule of law and human rights on the bilateral agenda, including private discussions with counterparts and frank public statements about worrying developments.

The European Union

Attitudes toward Turkey have soured among Western European governments, particularly those where the country has become a domestic political issue.⁶⁹ EU accession is off the table in the near future given the state of Turkey's democracy. The June 2018 European Council conclusions noted: "Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union, ... [and] accession negotiations

have therefore effectively come to a standstill,” with no prospect of opening or closing chapters.⁷⁰ Yet neither side wants to be the first to walk away, as there would be political and economic costs for ending the accession process completely. This process provides a useful framework for efforts to keep Turkey anchored in a Euro-Atlantic community based on shared values, as well as an agreed set of benchmarks for judging Turkey’s performance.

There have been calls to upgrade the EU-Turkey customs union, which has been an effective tool in making Turkish industrial products internationally competitive and tying the Turkish economy to the EU.⁷¹ An upgraded customs union would extend the agreement’s scope—which dates to 1995 and covers limited economic sectors—to include service industries, agriculture, and public procurement. It would also require Turkish reforms in dispute resolution, state aid, procurement, and services regulation. Such measures would improve Turkey’s governance by requiring compliance with a regulatory framework supported by enforcement rules.⁷² Although the European Council conclusions ruled out further modernization, the EU should re-examine this issue after the May 2019 European Parliament elections.

For now, the relationship is increasingly marked by a transactional approach exemplified by the EU-Turkey migration deal of March 2016. After Europe was flooded by over a million refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the summer of 2015, the two sides reached an agreement: In exchange for EU funding to support Turkey’s efforts to host 3.5 million Syrian refugees, Turkey would work to prevent irregular migration to the EU. The deal also promised visa liberalization for Turkish nationals, though its implementation requires Ankara to reform its repressive anti-terror legislation, among other measures. The EU should continue supporting refugee-related activities and grant visa liberalization when the requirements are met.

NATO

Turkey, which joined NATO in 1952 as part of the alliance’s first expansion, fields its second-largest army and is its third most populous member. It is also geographically strategic, given its proximity to Russia and the Middle East. Although NATO’s founding charter cites “the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law,” it has no mechanism for expelling members or responding to behavior inconsistent with these values.⁷³ (Throughout its history, the alliance has witnessed democratic backsliding and even coups among its members.) As challenging as it can be to engage Turkey inside NATO, it would be even harder to work with Turkey outside NATO. Furthermore, Russia would be one of the primary beneficiaries of alliance disengagement from Turkey.⁷⁴ Military-military ties, which have largely remained insulated from political tensions, should be preserved; in particular, NATO should seek to integrate Turkish military personnel who were appointed after the post-coup purges of senior officers. It should also continue to provide security for the alliance’s southern flank, including protection of Turkey’s border with Syria.

Other European institutions

Despite adopting an anti-Western narrative, Erdoğan and AKP leaders recognize the cost and difficulty of breaking away from European institutions. Although the Turkish government may react forcefully to critical reports from these organizations, they confer a degree of legitimacy and help preserve some European credentials during a difficult period with the EU.

Rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) are generally respected in Turkey. For example, in January 2018, it compelled a Turkish lower court to respect a constitutional court ruling calling for the release of two journalists.⁷⁵ In November 2018, the court called for the immediate release of HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş; although Erdoğan’s initial reaction was to reject the ruling, the formal judicial process is not yet complete as this paper went to press.

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Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe since its foundation in 1949. The Council should continue to address abuses against journalists, opposition politicians, and government critics in Turkey. It should press Ankara to implement ECHR rulings on gross miscarriages of justice. The monitoring process introduced by its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), which was lifted during AKP rule in 2004 and reopened in the spring of 2017 after the constitutional referendum, should continue in order to encourage democratic improvements.⁷⁶

The OSCE serves as a watchdog via its election monitoring activity, with American and European governments regularly using its reports to guide their reactions to Turkish votes. It should continue to monitor Turkish elections, including local polls in March 2019.

Turkish civil society

Although Turkish people must ultimately wage the struggle for the future of their own democracy, Western leaders can best support the work of democracy activists by consistently addressing Turkish government actions that are incompatible with trans-Atlantic values.

Amid fractious political relations, it is important to preserve people-to-people ties. The United States and the EU should continue backing international, European, and regional mechanisms with established programs in Turkey. For example, they should expand cultural and educational exchange programs to enable Turkish citizens—ranging from youth and entrepreneurs to activists and parliamentarians—to engage their Western counterparts on shared interests. Although financial support to civil society organizations can provide a valuable lifeline, its provision should be handled sensitively given the Turkish government's watchful eye and public suspicion about the motives behind foreign aid.

In addition, the international community should continue to provide humanitarian support to civil society and municipalities struggling to house the large number of Syrian and other refugees in Turkey.

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