

How to Deal with Post-Coup Turkey?

Sep 19, 2016 by [Joost Lagendijk](#)

Turkey is still recovering from the failed coup attempt on 15 July 15. It is now two months after the shocking events in which 240 people were killed and the aftershocks are still rocking the country. Most European politicians are grappling with the aftermath of the aborted military takeover. How should the EU behave toward Turkey? Can it still be business as usual or have things changed fundamentally? What does the coup mean for the refugee deal and the discussion about visa liberalisation that will again be on the top of the Turkey-EU agenda this autumn?

There are many reasons why relations between Turkey and the EU have become problematic and most of them have nothing to do with the coup. One of the reasons for the current soul searching, however, is related to the July 15 events and that is the enormous gap between the perception about the putsch inside Turkey and outside of the country.

From day one, the Turkish government claims it knows for sure who planned and executed the aborted military takeover: the Gülen movement. The majority of foreign analysts agrees that most probably Gülenists were involved but so were other factions in the army such as diehard secularists and anti-Erdogan opportunists. So far, most Turks fully back the official version. His supporters believe President Erdogan is right as always. With many others, the vicious campaign against the Gülen movement since 2014 is bearing fruit now. Most of Erdogan's political opponents always hated the movement anyway for allegedly being obscure and Islamist. On the other hand, although there is no love lost between most foreign Turkey specialists and the Gülen movement, many of them feel the evidence presented till now is insufficient, not convincing and at least partly obtained through illegal methods such as torture.

It will probably take many more months or years for the truth about the putsch to come out. That process of separating fiction from facts is not helped by the recent government decision to impose a media ban on all reporting on the coup. It means the few courageous Turkish journalists working on the July events won't be able to publish their findings in Turkey and interested foreign reporters will have a hard time gathering reliable information.

Purge

Whatever the final outcome of these investigations, in the meantime a purge of inconceivable proportions is taking place in Turkey. There is a real witch hunt taking place against anybody who in one way or the other can be linked to the Gülen movement. But the arrests and intimidations are going far beyond that specific group of people: Kurdish journalists and activists are targeted, over 10,000 Kurdish teachers have been suspended. Critical commentators with no links to either the Gülen movement or the Kurdish nationalist movement have been arrested as well. It is now mid-September and the numbers are staggering: Since 15 July, 100,000 people have lost their job or have been suspended; 23,700 have been arrested, including 117 journalists; 2,100 schools, dormitories and universities have been closed and 3,400 judges and prosecutors dismissed. On top of that, tens of companies with a value of several billions of euro have been confiscated. The immediate result is that from one day to the other hundreds of thousands of Turks are without an income and are struggling to survive.

The dismissal of thousands of highly qualified teachers, academics and legal specialists is a heavy blow to Turkey's judicial and educational system. While Turkey urgently needs an upgrade of both fundamental institutions to be able to continue growing economically, the results of the current wave of expulsions will be a setback from which it will take years to recover.

Miscommunication

The immediate reactions from Europe to the coup have created a lot of disappointment and anger in Turkey. Sometimes for the wrong reasons, but not always. There is the often repeated claim by the Turkish authorities that the EU was too slow and too hesitant in its reaction. That is demonstrably not correct. The Brussels institutions and European governments reacted as quickly as could be expected on an early Saturday morning and their condemnation of the putsch was unequivocal. The problem with the European response, however, was not with the speed but with the wrong emphasis and the lack of empathy.

In Turkey, both supporters and opponents of the ruling party had and still have the impression that Turkey only narrowly escaped disaster on 15 July. Had it not been for the courageous resistance of thousands of ordinary Turks who took to the streets to stop the tanks, Turkey could well have faced a bloody civil war. The recognition of that sentiment was totally absent from the European (and American, for that matter) reactions immediately after the coup. Adding insult to injury, the EU seemed more concerned with the treatment of the coup perpetrators than with the victims. It is obvious that European governments getting it wrong on this point is directly related to the lack of sympathy with Erdogan and the disaffection in many European capitals with the rising tide of authoritarianism in Turkey since 2011. For good reasons, many European politicians were afraid the all-powerful president would abuse the failed coup to settle domestic scores. That analysis proved to be correct. But at the same time, it stood in the way of a fair reaction right after the shocking events of 15 July that traumatised many Turks.

What now?

For every mainstream European politician, the challenge is now how to balance the worries about Turkey's democratic back sliding with the need to connect to the country to defend Europe's short and long term strategic interests (refugees, energy, security, Middle East). For Greens, Social Democrats and most Liberals, there is an additional reason why formulating a new position is such a laborious process. In the European Parliament and in most national parliaments, for years they were the political groups defending Turkey's accession to the EU. How to square this past commitment with the current need to show a clear and strong reaction to the purge and to Erdogan's slide into authoritarianism? To make things even more complicated, many Turkish liberals and democrats, traditionally big supporters of Turkey's EU accession and close allies to Europe's pro-Turkey parties, have turned against the EU. Especially those being forced to live outside Turkey these days are angry and extremely disappointed. They consider the reaction of the EU to Erdogan's grab for power in the last two years as being too soft. They have also turned against the EU-Turkey refugee deal that, according to them, strengthens Erdogan's position and undermines EU's claim to be a defender of democracy and human rights. Under pressure from several sides, what should be the answer of the European Greens? There are several options. Let's start with the most radical one.

Stop negotiations

Until now only the Austrian government has publicly called for a complete halt to the negotiations between Turkey and the EU about future membership. It is clear this call

is closely related to domestic politics in Austria and the upcoming repeat vote on the presidency. Still, the demand reflects the view of many other Europeans, especially those attracted to populist radical right parties that are on the rise in many EU Member States.

But we can be brief about this option. In the foreseeable future it is not going to happen. Unless there are dramatic unforeseen developments in Turkey or inside the EU, many governments will not be willing to pull the plug on Turkey. While Turkey is a subject of hot debates in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, France, Austria and Belgium, not coincidentally all countries with a sizable Turkish origin community, in most EU Member States it is not. For countries like Italy, Spain and Poland Turkey's accession is a non-issue at the moment. In the past, substantial majorities in these countries across party political lines were in favour of Turkey's EU membership. Now most voters don't care and most politicians have taken a back seat on the topic. But many of them are not willing to block Turkey's accession for the next 25 years because they still expect some benefits for the EU or their own country when and if it happens one day.

Because such a radical decision requires unanimity among Member States, it is hard to see such a decisive conclusion being reached in the next couple of years. Apart from EU procedures that make such a radical decision highly unlikely, there is of course the calculation by many states, including some that are not particularly keen on Turkey's accession, that burning all bridges now will lethally harm Europe's strategic interests in many other fields where cooperation with Turkey is inevitable.

Suspend negotiations

A more realistic option seems to be the suspension of negotiations. There is no need for unanimity there and it looks like a temporary and less hostile reaction that would not cut ties forever.

Article 5 of the EU-Turkey negotiating framework of October 2005 deals with this option 'in the case of a serious and persistent breach in Turkey of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.' The European Commission can recommend such a decision on its own initiative or on the request of one third of the Member States. So it is theoretically feasible that Austria will be able to find eight other countries willing to send out this strong signal to Ankara. The Member States will decide by qualified majority (55% of Member States that represent 65% of the EU population) on such a recommendation. The European Parliament will only be informed.

That decision will also have to include the conditions for eventual resumption of the talks. That is where things get complicated. It is predictable that countries like Austria will insist on the need to have a unanimous vote on restarting the negotiations because they are afraid of being outvoted in a regular qualified majority procedure. That would imply that suspending now de facto means stopping forever. Even when circumstances would change in Turkey to allow a resumption of talks, there will always be one EU member state government that will object, most probably for purely domestic reasons.

Calling for suspension is like opening Pandora's Box. Nobody really knows where things will go from there but realistically speaking the end result will be a final judgment on Turkey's membership from where there is no return.

Stop pre-accession aid

So if stopping or suspending negotiations is not a realistic or desirable option, why not stop sending money to Turkey till the situation has improved? It sounds fair and doable but the question is whom you would be punishing: Erdogan or ordinary Turks profiting from the pre-accession aid that has been going to Turkey since 2005? This money does not flow into the state's coffers but is spent on projects that without European financial help would not or only partially or belatedly be implemented. Looking at the list of the last couple of years, the question arises whether the Greens want to be responsible for stopping the following initiatives: building wastewater treatment facilities, modernising drinking water distribution systems, improving waste management services, supporting civil society organizations that promote fundamental rights, improving food safety and training and educating women to find a job.

What seems at first sight to be a technocratic measure to warn Turkish authorities would in reality be a serious disruption of projects from which many ordinary Turkish citizens all around the country benefit.

Stop refugee deal

From a green perspective the EU-Turkey refugee deal that was struck in March of this year definitively sucks. To mention just a few objections often mentioned by green politicians and activists: the EU should do more, refugees do not get the treatment they deserve and Turkey is not a safe country for refugees. It is true that since the beginning of this year Turkey has been much more restrictive in allowing Syrian refugees in. It is also correct that non-Syrian refugees sent back to Turkey face an unknown future because they will not receive the relatively beneficial treatment that Syrian refugees get once they have entered the country. The EU should push Turkey to raise its standards and offer help to do so if needed. But the problematic sides of the deal are also related to the EU failing to live up to its commitments. The situation in Greece – both on the islands and on the main land – is a disgrace because the Greeks are not able to cope with around 60,000 refugees and because the EU is unable to offer the required assistance. Promises to resettle tens of thousands of refugees from Greece to other EU Member States have not been kept.

The problem with calling for the cancellation of the whole deal is that there is no alternative available that is acceptable to both the EU and Turkey. If this deal fails, the flow of refugees from Turkey to the EU will rise again. It is an illusion to think that then, all of a sudden, Greece and the EU will do much better than they are doing today. It will mean a new round of suffering and dying in the waters between Turkey and Greece.

A better way forward for the Greens seems to be to try and improve on the deal that is available. By pushing and assisting Turkey, but more importantly by making the deal work on the EU side by removing the political and technical obstacles put in place by unwilling governments and hesitant populations.

Stop visa liberalisation

Before the end of this year Turkey and the EU will have to find common ground on the visa liberalisation which is a crucial part of the refugee deal. Turkey has to fulfil over 70 benchmarks before Member States are willing to lift the obligation for Turkish citizens to obtain a visa if they want to travel to the Schengen area. Most of these criteria have been met, but there is one proving to be problematic. That is the Turkish anti-terror law, used not only to fight terrorist organisations like the Kurdish PKK or

the Islamic State but also to crack down on domestic critics accused of terrorism. We can clearly witness such practices in the current purge.

Finding a formulation that satisfies the EU and is acceptable to Turkey won't be easy. But it should be tried. Because, again, whom would you be punishing in blocking visa liberalisation? Erdogan will happily blame it on the Europeans and the result will be that travelling abroad will remain cumbersome for Turks who want to escape from the oppressive mood in the country.

There is, to be honest, no attractive alternative for any of the above-mentioned options. What can be done is to bring the official negotiations to a practical stand still as long as there is the state of emergency in Turkey but without triggering the suspension procedure. That would mean that no new chapters will be opened and the EU will put very little energy into talks on the ones that have been opened before. Brussels and national capitals will keep on dealing with Ankara on specific, concrete issues such as refugees and jihadists travelling to and from Turkey. For the Greens the best way forward would be to concentrate on supporting non-violent opposition parties and groups in Turkey that continue to challenge Erdogan's dominance. That may be less appealing than making a big gesture such as slamming the door. But relations with Turkey are simply too important to give in to easy solutions that will only prove to be unworkable and counterproductive.