HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
EUROPEAN UNION

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

Euro-Turks, Erdogan and the Confusion of European Progressives

Dec 13, 2016 by Joost Lagendijk

The failed coup of July 15 and its aftermath have deepened dividing lines in Turkish society that were already visible before the bloody putsch attempt: between followers of Fethullah Gülen and other conservative Muslims, between Turks and nationalist Kurds and, in general, between supporters and critics of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These fissures can also be observed within the communities of Euro-Turks in several European countries. Like the majority of Turks, most European citizens with Turkish roots support the current crackdown on Gülenists, Kurds and other dissidents in Turkey. As a result, in countries like the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium tensions have risen inside the Turkish communities. The aggression and distrust in Turkey has been copied in the Turkish Diaspora. Many Europeans find it hard to understand why so many of their fellow citizens of Turkish origin rally behind a leader perceived by non-Turks as being authoritarian and divisive.

Traditionally, Greens, Social-Democrats and other progressive parties have had good relations with large parts of the Turkish communities in their countries. How should they react to this poisoned atmosphere among Euro-Turks and the growing mutual incomprehension between Euro-Turks and the rest of the societies they live in? On the one hand, European progressives are clear and outspoken in their criticism of what is considered to be a disproportionate witch hunt by the Turkish authorities on all Erdogan critics. On the other, many Euro-Turks support the ruling party and have shown an understanding for the purges. How to deal with the present tensions and differences of opinion that are threatening to create lasting gaps that will be hard to overcome in the foreseeable future?

AKP support

Euro-Turkish backing for Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym AKP) is not a recent phenomenon that only started after the July 15 coup attempt. In previous Turkish elections, in most EU Member States with a substantial Turkish community, the majority of Europeans with Turkish roots voted in favour of the party that has been ruling Turkey since the end of 2002. In the latest round of voting during the November 1, 2015 parliamentary election, 69 percent of Turkish Dutch and Turkish Belgian citizens voted in favour of the AKP. In Germany, 60 percent did the same. In comparison: in Turkey, just under 50 percent of the electorate decided to support the party dominated by Erdogan.

How to explain this enormous popularity of the AKP among Euro-Turks? To a large extent, Euro-Turkish sympathies mirror the general reasons why around half of the Turkish population keeps on championing Erdogan. There is of course his personal charisma and oratorical talent. But there are two main reasons that have made Erdogan so popular among Turkish voters. One is the fact he is a so-called 'Black Turk'. It is the nickname used by poor, lower educated pious Turkish Muslims to describe their social status. One that is opposed to that of the 'White Turks', the followers of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923, who became the new rulers dominating the Turkish state and its main institutions till the beginning of the 21st century. Till the AKP came to power in 2002, most 'Black Turks' shared the feeling they were being marginalised economically, socially and culturally by an elite that was out of touch with their conservative and religious preferences. 'Black Turks' and their children make up

approximately 60 percent of the Turkish population of which by far the most have voted for the AKP since 2002. A minority of 'Black Turks' prefers the Turkish nationalist MHP party. Erdogan was born in a poor Istanbul migrant neighbourhood, a child from poorly educated and pious parents. Throughout his political career, he has always been proud of being a 'Black Turk' whose appeal is based on fighting an elite that for decades has treated his 'Black Turk' brothers and sisters badly. To the present day, during speeches and interviews Erdogan keeps repeating his credentials as a 'Black Turk' because he realises very well his humble background has created an incredibly strong bond between himself and half of the Turkish population that sees Erdogan as 'their man'.

Almost all Turkish workers who moved to Europe in the sixties and seventies were 'Black Turks'. They and many of their children and grandchildren share the 'Black Turk' sympathy for Erdogan and his party.

The second important reason why both many Turks and Euro-Turks have voted to keep the AKP in power for such a long time is the pride they feel when they look at the new Turkey under Erdogan. For most of the 20th century, Turkey was a poor country treated by the West as a junior partner. Since 2002, the Turkish economy has boomed and many Turks have been able to enjoy a level of consumption that they could only dream of before. On top of that, and partly as a result of the economic upturn, Erdogan has started to act as a strong, straight-talking leader who speaks up for Turkey's interests and, if necessary, is willing to confront the Europeans and Americans when he thinks Turkey is not being treated properly. Turks and Euro-Turks alike are proud of the newly found self-confidence embodied by Erdogan.

There is, however, a third reason for Erdogan's popularity among Europeans of Turkish descent; one that is closely linked to the situation of Euro-Turks in their countries of residence. The debate about their problematic integration has been going on for many years now. On the one hand, there are a lot of Euro-Turks who have become regular citizens, economically and socially successful, focused first and foremost on the country they live in. On the other, there are still many Euro-Turks who do not feel at home in the Netherlands or Germany because they feel they are being discriminated against and treated, even after two generations, as second class citizens. The recent rise of Islamophobia has only strengthened this perception of alienation. For those Euro-Turks, Erdogan is a beacon of hope, the big brother back home who is willing to speak up for them, the man who is not afraid to accuse European leaders of hypocrisy and double standards.

Extreme polarisation

The failed coup of July 15 has led to a process of extreme polarisation: in Turkey and Europe, between Turks supporting Erdogan's witch hunt and those seen as being supportive of the Gülen movement, blamed by the Turkish authorities as being the mastermind behind the putsch effort. But also between Erdogan followers and European progressives who can't understand why so many Euro-Turks keep supporting a president considered by many leftists and liberals in Europe as an authoritarian leader who should be condemned.

In the Netherlands, parties like the Greens and Social Democrats are struggling with a situation in which part of their Turkish origin electorate and some of their elected representatives with Turkish roots have publicly expressed their sympathy for Erdogan and the AKP. What to do with

party members who are, apparently, able to combine a progressive political position in the Netherlands with support for a conservative and repressive regime in Ankara? Can this ambiguity be tolerated or should progressive parties be clear and tell these Euro-Turks with double loyalties to take sides?

According to diehard secularists and outspoken anti-AKP progressives, the answer is clear: you cannot be a committed Green or Social Democrat and an AKP supporter at the same time. There is no place inside progressive parties in Europe for Euro-Turks who have openly declared their sympathies for Erdogan, even if these AKP supporters have condemned the current purges. As a result, several Green and Social Democratic Euro-Turks in the Netherlands have been expelled from the party.

Others, however, have a problem with this rigid dichotomy. They too find it hard to understand how progressive Euro-Turks are able to combine their Green and Left convictions with an understanding for Erdogan and the ruling party in Turkey. At the same time, they are eager to find out what exactly makes this combination possible and are unwilling to condemn their party colleagues before they have at least tried to come to grips with their motivations.

Personally, I belong to this second group. That is why I believe Greens and Social Democrats should deal in a proper way with the current confusion inside their parties with regard to pro-Erdogan Euro-Turks. The aim is to prevent a lasting divide between the majority of Euro-Turks who support Erdogan and European progressives who resent the Turkish president.

Bridging some divides

Before trying to bridge this gaping divide, let me be clear on the limitations of this effort. I do not have any illusion about many Erdogan supporters in Europe. Although I understand the background and roots of their choice, I have no sympathy at all for their political beliefs that are often extremely conservative, intolerant, nationalistic or otherwise incompatible with progressive values. In other words: for many Erdogan voters there simply is no place in Green or Social Democratic parties. When voting in their country of residence, they would be well advised to support a centre-right or conservative party. The reason they often do not do so is, of course, related to the fact that in most cases these parties are outspoken opponents of Turkish accession to the EU or supporters of racist or discriminatory politics toward Euro-Turks and other Europeans with foreign roots. It is the main reason why, till now, many conservative and nationalistic Euro-Turks end up voting for a progressive party that, purely based on their ideology, they should not be supporting.

It is not these hardcore conservative Euro-Turks I am interested in. My concern is with the considerable number of Euro-Turks that feel attracted to progressive values but, at the same time, tend to vote for Erdogan. There are two reasons why I want to know how they can handle these contradictions. One is that I find it foolish to push Euro-Turks away from progressive politics just because Euro-progressives are too lazy and prejudiced to try and find out what motivates them. Secondly, if progressive parties want to convince Euro-Turks that Erdogan is not a good leader and is creating problems that will haunt Turkey for many years to come, they need to be on speaking terms with them.

It is basically the same kind of reasoning that has convinced progressive parties in Europe, while strongly opposing radical-right populist parties, to try and understand what motivates their electorate. In this case: it makes perfect sense to sit down with pro-Erdogan Euro-Turks with progressive sympathies and try to find out why they support the current president. It may well be that some of these motives are not anti-progressive at all but related, for example, to better access for regular Turks to health care services and universities; or because some of their family members can now afford a new apartment; or because Turkey has strongly supported the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad dictatorship; or because they are fed up with European hypocrisy over Turkey's membership of the EU and appreciate Erdogan's firm stance against that.

Most probably, there are many understandable reasons why progressive Euro-Turks ended up voting for Erdogan in 2015. One does not need to agree with all of them. One should, of course, speak out against any attempt to defend or justify obvious violations of human rights by the AKP in the past and the present. One could even come to the conclusion that the gap is too wide and that some self-declared progressives with Turkish roots really do not belong in Green or Social-Democratic parties because their views simply do not match with the values these parties cherish. But such an effort to understand and possibly bridge differences that seem irreconcilable at first sight should be made.

It would be a major mistake to refuse to discuss these disparities and just accept there is an unbridgeable gap. These are hard times for progressives in Europe because some of their fundamental beliefs are challenged. From one side by populists from the right and the left who sometimes voice opinions, for instance on the welfare state, that were once defended by the centre-left. From another by Europeans with foreign roots who translate the uneasiness and alienation they feel in the country in which they live into support for strong leaders in their country of origin. Greens and Social-Democrats will only be able to find convincing answers to these challenges if they manage to make a difference between, on the one hand, the politicians trying to manipulate these concerns for their own electoral gains that should be condemned and, on the other, the people who are disappointed with progressive politics and whose concerns should be taken seriously.