

On Easter Sunday, the Turkish electorate will go to the polls for a much less felicitous but politically momentary reason. Over 55 million citizens will vote in a referendum to accept or reject constitutional amendments that would transform the Turkish political system into a *sui generis* presidential one and perhaps change the regime. Turkey's domestic order and its democracy as well as the country's two century-old western trajectory and therefore relations with the European Union may also be at stake.

In a thoughtful article with the slightly dramatic title "The end of Turkey's European history", the Italian scholar of Europe Fabrizio Tassinari declared the end of Turkey's accession process for membership in the EU. Tassinari's verdict is appropriate since for all intents and purposes, that process is comatose and is unlikely to be revitalized any time soon, if ever. Yet, Turkey's European history does not end there. The EU and Turkey will have plenty of important business to do in cooperation with one another, if not necessarily as partners or members of the same club. As the controversial refugee deal demonstrated, the two sides are destined to work together even if on an *ad hoc* basis. Rupture is not really an option.

Yet there is no doubt that the events of the past few weeks, when Turkey came at loggerheads with Germany and the Netherlands over its politicians' scheduled political campaigns in these countries, burned many bridges between the parties. The Turks were incensed by the attitude of the authorities and the unnecessarily rough treatment of a minister by the Dutch authorities. Undoubtedly, taking a harsh position against Turkey paid off handsomely for the incumbent Prime Minister Rütte, who staved off a major challenge by the radical right winger, Geert Wilders.

At their turn, the two countries and other Europeans were rightly incensed by the loose and frequent use of the labels Fascist and Nazis by the Turkish President who fanned the flames of anti-Europeanism as an expedient way of garnering support for the yes vote in a pending referendum on Constitutional amendments. Questioning the essence of Turkey's relations with the EU, Mr. Erdoğan said that **"Turkey will review all political and administrative ties with the EU after the April referendum, but will maintain economic relations."**

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that has done so much to advance the cause of membership in the EU when it first came to power, is no longer enthusiastic about or even interested in such a prospect. They have long abandoned an EU inspired reform program to further Turkey's democratic order. If anything, the country's trajectory in the past few years has been distinctively towards a less liberal political system where judicial independence and the rule of law are all but suspended.

The pace of the descent accelerated after the coup attempt of July 15 and brought the country under a relentless state of emergency as a result of which a major purge within the administrative apparatus, the academia and the media took place. This purge that was not limited to the members of the Gülen network that was responsible for the coup attempt and along with the persecution of pro-Kurdish party politicians resulted in the incarceration of many individuals without official charges being brought against them.

If the package of constitutional amendments is approved by the electorate, Turkey will change its system into a presidential one. This Presidentialism *alla turca* will abolish the post of the Prime Minister. It will concentrate political and administrative power in the hands of the executive President who will be the leader of a political party. The National Assembly that is the founding institution of the Turkish Republic will lose many of its powers and could be dismissed by the President. Its ability to check or balance the executive will be severely curtailed.

The mechanisms to appoint members of the high judiciary will guarantee a domination of the President over that body as well. This should put into further jeopardy the already thin layers of independence and impartiality of the judiciary and render separation of powers redundant. That the political changes in Turkey will be accompanied by a project of social transformation that will attempt to erase part of the Westernizing legacy of late Ottoman and Republican eras, gives the matter added urgency.

The Turkish public remains, against all odds, still desirous of EU membership even if it does not believe in the plausibility of the goal. But the anti-European and anti-Western diatribes of senior politicians and pundits resonate with the public because of the perceived lack of solidarity on the part of the EU at the time of the bloody coup attempt of 15 July 2016.

Looking forward, a number of questions present themselves. Will Mr. Erdoğan try to reinstitute the death penalty? Will he bring the matter to a vote in yet another referendum? The death penalty would be a sure way of getting a suspension of the accession process and more importantly, a breaking of relations with the Council of Europe. This would then lead to a withdrawal from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, that under current circumstances is the last remaining, judicial recourse for many Turkish citizens.

The EU has been oblivious to the domestic developments in Turkey for a long time, as if the secular and democratic Turkish public did not matter. This will no longer be the case, but Brussels will also have a lot less leverage over Ankara than ever before. In the near future the two sides will need to concentrate on the continuation of the refugee deal, the modernization of the mutually beneficial customs union, cooperating on counterterrorism. Then, one would have to hope that on a different basis for cooperation the two sides will be able to repair the damage of the past few years and recognize the necessity of re-engaging with one another on a constructive agenda.

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