

THE END OF THE EU PROJECT IN TURKEY?

156

DETERMINANTS OF TURKEY'S EU-BID UNDER
THE AKP REGIME

Toni Alaranta

FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 156 • June 2014



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE END OF THE EU PROJECT IN TURKEY?

DETERMINANTS OF TURKEY'S EU-BID UNDER THE AKP REGIME

FIIA Briefing Paper 156

June 2014



Toni Alaranta
Senior Research Fellow
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

- Ever since the founding of the Republic in 1923, the idea of making Turkey a European country has been a major component of the nation-building project, although Europe has also been perceived as a threat.
- The incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) embarked on an EU-inspired reform project at first, but has subsequently taken an increasingly anti-European position.
- Turkey's EU bid under the AKP government needs to be seen within the context of the domestic power struggle, whose origins can be traced to two opposing modernization alternatives: radical and Islamic.
- Within the domestic power struggle, the AKP has used the EU process as a tool to de-legitimize the secularist state elite-lite, composed of the armed forces and the judiciary.
- After having consolidated its hegemony, the AKP abandoned its EU aspirations, and there is currently very little societal pressure from the AKP constituency to continue the EU reforms.

The European Union research programme
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Turkey's European vocation and the AKP

Turkey's ambition to become a European nation is a centennial project. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 on the idea of transforming the Anatolian territories of the former Ottoman Empire into a modern, secular nation-state. Europe was seen as Turkey's destiny. At the same time, however, the West in general and major European powers such as France and England in particular, have always been seen as a threat to Turkey's independence. It was, after all, these powers that planned to partition the Ottoman Anatolian territories, and the only reason why this did not happen was due to Turkish armed resistance during the critical years of 1919–1922. The ambivalence towards Europe thus lies at the very heart of Turkey's national identity. That said, during the Cold War and all the way to the new millennium, Turkey's foreign policy was deeply anchored in the West.

In addition to being driven by matters of collective identity-building, European Union membership has been an aspiration for economic reasons. For many in Turkey, Europe is seen not only as a model of a functioning democracy, but also as a prosperous continent with high income levels. The incentive of economic development and prosperity has indeed been one of the main driving forces in Turkey's EU aspiration for several decades. For this reason, it is no coincidence that the decline in enthusiasm for the EU among Turkish citizens has coincided with Turkey's remarkable growth, and an economic crisis in Europe.

This was one of the reasons why the notion that "Turkey does not need Europe" recently became something of a mantra among Turkish politicians. Yet, even though the economic factor is important, it hardly explains the anti-European tendencies in present-day Turkey. Since 2002, a new, in many ways unprecedented political development has occurred in the country. This era has been marked by the dominant position of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The AKP era has special significance in Turkey's political history in general and in its relationship to the European Union in particular. Obviously, a comprehensive analysis of the Turkey-EU relationship under the AKP government would require investigating both sides, because the EU has surely contributed to the current stalemate, especially by

implementing the idea of "absorption capacity" in the official EU texts, by putting the responsibility for resolving the Cyprus question squarely on Turkey's shoulders, and by the anti-Turkish public statements made by key EU leaders. Here, however, the focus is on the Turkish side. One can argue that the AKP has, in a paradoxical way, simultaneously brought Turkey closer to Europe than any previous government and, on the other hand, nearly managed to destroy the decades-long social imaginary of Turkey's European destiny among the majority.

This paper asks how this contradictory situation came about and what the main driving forces have been in Turkey's EU prospect during the AKP era. In order to answer these questions, the paper firstly briefly outlines the characteristics of Turkey's modernization project and then recounts the main political developments during the last ten years. After this, the AKP's foreign policy, especially in terms of the EU, is analyzed against this domestic setting in order to provide an explanation for today's frequently asked question about why the AKP transformed from an EU-inspired reforming party into an authoritarian, nationalist (increasingly anti-Western) Islamic-conservative party conducting a highly unpredictable foreign policy.

Turkey's modernization: radical and Islamic alternatives

The main fault line in Turkey's political history runs between radical and Islamic modernizers. The struggle to be able to determine which of the two alternatives is chosen is thus embedded in the struggle over the ability to control the state in Turkey. The Republic of Turkey, as a Muslim-majority society, is a state steeped in narratives of "becoming a European" – as a matter of fact, the idea of Europe (and Europeanization) inhabits the very foundation of the state entity established in Ottoman Anatolia after World War One.

The Kemalist political and cultural revolution that energized the policies of the single-party regime during 1925–1950 defined Turkey's Islamic socio-political order as a hindrance to the country's development and as the main cause of Turkey's weakness in the international order dominated by European powers. This reading of Turkey's situation was advocated by the Kemalist state elite that founded the Republic and implemented radical secularizing

reforms in order to get rid of the Islamic normative order that had penetrated all layers of society during the 600 years of the Ottoman Empire. But radical Westernizing has never been the only option. Even during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic version of modernization occurred, and this trend gained ground again after 1950 with the establishment of Turkey's multi-party democracy. The AKP government is the current manifestation of this alternative, Islamic vision of modernization in the contemporary context.

In previous studies, the AKP is usually seen as the final victory of the conservative Anatolian periphery over the radical Westernizing state elite.¹ The AKP leadership is composed of politicians who have received their political education in Turkey's own tradition of political Islam. According to the conventional wisdom, this group had, by the end of the 1990s, reached a conclusion according to which their radical Islamist political programme could never achieve a lasting power base in Turkey's strictly secular system, guarded by the army and the judiciary. This conclusion implied that these new Islamist actors had completely changed their anti-Western discourse and defined the EU's liberal, rights-based normative stance as a channel through which they could carve out a legitimate space for themselves and their religious constituency. Ever since that decision, a debate has been raging in Turkey on what this new "post-Islamist" political articulation means, and whether or not a new workable synthesis between secular-liberalism and Islamic conservatism has been established. This implies that by the beginning of the new millennium, modernization, secularism, Westernization, and the Turkish national identity had become thoroughly contested concepts.

The AKP and the "Turkish model"

What seemed to characterize the "new Turkey" under the AKP government was the apprehension that, in terms of a "European vocation", Turkey's political forces had been turned upside down. Previous anti-Western Islamists had become

pro-European liberals, while the Kemalist secularists had become anti-Western nationalists eager to maintain the status quo in Turkey. This perception was allegedly confirmed during 2002–2005 when the AKP embarked on a tremendous reform project in order to fulfill the EU's Copenhagen criteria, (*acquis communautaire*), the 35 chapters that encapsulate the accumulated legislation, legal acts, and court decisions of the EU, all of which a candidate country needs to implement. The attempt to fulfill these criteria has often been described as the final stage in Turkey's long-held mission to become a European country.

During these years of EU-inspired reforms, Turkey has often been cited as an example for other Middle-Eastern countries to follow – an allegedly workable "Muslim democracy", often dubbed the "Turkish model". The beginning of the new millennium was not the first time that Turkey had been perceived as a model for the rest of the Middle East: it had a similar role during the 1920s and afterwards, when several Middle-Eastern Muslim-majority societies saw Turkey's secularizing-modernizing (or Westernizing) reforms as an example to follow. Subsequently, from the 1980s onwards, Turkey's Kemalist modernization project, guarded and guided by the army and the judiciary, was then increasingly perceived as an obstacle to full-fledged democracy (and a European vocation).² Thus, within this perspective, it was deemed that the AKP regime, allegedly determined to implement the EU's requirements, would finally be able to realize Turkey's modernization project by building not only a secular and modern, but also a fully democratic regime – something initially promised but never fulfilled by the Kemalist military-bureaucratic state elite.

Talk of a "Turkish model" can be framed within the general international context of the beginning of the 2000s. After the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, the Western world, besides being guided by the US doctrine of the "war against terror", was seemingly eager to find a stable, Western-oriented ally in the Islamic world. Within this context, Turkey's AKP was often referred to as an example of "moderate Islam", a successful combination of

1 See for example Hale, William and Ergun Özbudun (2009): *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The case of the AKP*. London: Routledge.

2 See Lee, R. D. (2012): *Religion and Politics in the Middle East. Identity, Ideology, Institutions, and Attitudes*. Boulder: Westview Press.

liberal democracy within a Muslim-majority society. Concepts often used within this context were “Muslim democracy”, “Islamic democracy” or “Muslim modernity”. However, as secular-oriented Turkish academics were quick to point out, the reason why Turkey was relatively democratic and stable was not because it had managed to create some kind of Islamic version of democracy, but because the Turkish Islamic party ruled within a strictly secular order. Others went even further and claimed that the very reason why Turkey had no significant radical Islamist sector was the country’s Kemalist heritage: the strictly secular regime had forced the radical Islamists to moderate their goals to a great extent, and thus induced them to articulate their religious political identities within the democratic system.

The AKP’s pro-EU discourse: the internal power struggle and de-legitimation of domestic opponents

During the Arab Spring in particular, Turkey’s stance as a model for the rest of the Middle East certainly seemed a promising proposal. But something happened along the way that has dashed these hopes. The liberal-democratic, EU-inspired reforming AKP has been transformed into an illiberal force eager to establish a crude majoritarian regime in Turkey; one that has no tolerance for those who do not share its vision – which includes about half of the population. Exactly when the AKP was transformed is somewhat unclear, but some of Turkey’s liberal intellectuals, such as İhsan Yılmaz, who originally supported and helped to legitimize this party of former hard core Islamists, situate this change as early as 2007 when the AKP embarked on its attempt not to reform Turkey’s notorious “omnipotent State”, but to capture it and turn it into a vehicle for their partisan policies.³

However, for most observers, it was only during and after the famous Gezi protests of May/June 2013 (which started as a reaction to a badly planned urban development project but morphed into

country-wide anti-government protests) that the AKP started to behave in a truly authoritarian manner, showing no tolerance for peaceful protesters. It is clear that the present illiberal tendencies within the AKP should not be seen as an inevitable result of its leaders’ political education in some sort of illiberal, monolithic political Islam.

However, it is also highly contentious to presume that the liberal-democratic programme and the adherence to economic liberalism make the AKP leadership – or its main constituency – genuine supporters of liberal values as understood within the EU. As has been convincingly demonstrated by M. Hakan Yavuz, even though the AKP is a pro-neoliberal and, in a sense, a pro-reformist party, it is also highly critical of the Europeanization/Westernization of Turkey.⁴ This is a prevalent attitude among its main constituency, and the legacy that the AKP has carried with it to the present day from the tradition of Turkish political Islam. Within this tradition, liberal freedoms and tolerance towards different lifestyles are not held in esteem, especially if they can be seen to jeopardize the traditional community established upon conservative, Islam-related values.

It is obvious, then, that even though the AKP and its conservative constituency can be seen as democrats within the Turkish context, they are hardly liberals. The leadership of the AKP is composed of people who received their political education under Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey’s “god-father” of political Islam. The secularist state elite was highly suspicious of the AKP, and this anxiety peaked when the secular judiciary tried to put an end to the whole party in 2008. However, by that time the AKP leadership had managed to de-legitimize its domestic opponents through its EU-inspired reform packages.

The increasing authoritarianism and unwillingness to continue the political reform thus forces one to ask whether the AKP’s EU reforms were purely instrumental. EU bashing has always been par for the course in the domestic politics of candidate countries, but in Turkey under the AKP this has reached unprecedented dimensions, especially as it is practised by a party that has expended an enormous amount of time and energy on legitimizing

3 Yılmaz, İhsan (2014): ‘Erdoğan and Gül’s miscalculation about capturing the state’, *Today’s Zaman*, 28 March 2014, available at http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/ih-san-yilmaz_343323_erdogan-and-gul-miscalculation-about-capturing-the-state.html.

4 Yavuz, M. Hakan (2009): *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

its pro-EU stance both at home and abroad. It is nevertheless increasingly difficult not to conclude that the governing AKP viewed the EU prospect in a thoroughly instrumental fashion, implementing the EU reforms during 2002–2007 only to the point that was necessary in order to delegitimize the traditional Kemalist military–bureaucratic state elite, finally crushing it. This hypothesis would make sense in that the EU reforms ended, or at least lost momentum, around the same time that the AKP became a truly dominant force in Turkey.

The AKP is first and foremost a coalition party composed of an influential but small liberal wing, the Anatolian market-oriented new middle class, the traditional conservative constituency, Islamist groups, and finally nationalists with an Islamic orientation. During recent years, the AKP, and especially Prime Minister Erdoğan, have been inclined to build a solid power base grounded in an Islamic-conservative bloc, by claiming that Turkey’s “national will” and Islam-oriented values are being threatened by “repressive secularists” and “immoral liberals”, rather than genuinely leading the country to EU membership.

The AKP’s EU project within the context of Turkey’s modernization: power, ideology, and identity

Much has been written in recent years about Turkey’s new foreign policy under the AKP. The new proactive foreign policy has often been seen as pragmatic in nature. The new emphasis on the Middle East, for example, has been seen as a return to Turkey’s natural area of interest, the culturally familiar Islamic world that was unnecessarily excluded during the era of the Kemalist, Western-oriented but otherwise passive foreign policy doctrine.

However, it is difficult to accept that this pragmatism accurately explains Turkey’s recent search for a new international identity. The AKP’s discourse has from the very beginning emphasized that Turkey belongs to a specifically Islamic civilization which is distinct from the Western/European civilization.⁵

5 See, for example, Edelman, Eric S. et al. (2013): *The Roots of Turkish Conduct: Understanding the Evolution of Turkish Policy in the Middle East*, Bipartisan Policy Center, December.

Tellingly, even the EU bid has often been framed by alluding to an “alliance of civilization”, where Turkey is able to function as a bridge between the Islamic and Western worlds. By accepting Turkey, so the argument went, the EU would indicate its willingness to tolerate other civilizations. The obvious snag in this seemingly constructive discourse is that it reiterates the idea, implied by Huntington’s infamous thesis of a “clash of civilizations”, that Western and Islamic civilizations are distinct, sealed, and well-defined unchanging cultural entities. The AKP’s emphasis on Turkey’s civilizational difference compared to the Western world marks a radical change in the Turkish context, since the Kemalist foreign policy doctrine always proceeded from the idea that Turkey is part and parcel of a common modern civilization.

In the domestic struggle, the AKP has naturalized religious adherence as the defining denominator in its attempt to create a coherent socio-political bloc as the basis for mass support in the context of competitive democracy. By looking at its impressive victories in every election since the 2002 general election, one can conclude that it has indeed accomplished this task. The logic of building a coherent constituency is such that it almost inevitably requires an opposite force, a section of the population that threatens “our” values and interests. For the conservative and Islamist parties in Turkey, this counter-image has always been the Kemalist/secularist state elite and the Westernized urban middle class. The Islamic-conservative constituency has been indoctrinated, ever since the 1950s, to perceive itself as being harassed, humiliated and excluded economically and culturally by the secularists. Within the tradition out of which the AKP originates, Turkey’s Westernization has always been seen as a degenerating process.

By now, this constituency recognizes that its representatives in power and its collective identity do not traditionally point towards Europe, but rather to the essentialized “Islamic civilization”. As long as the AKP leadership convinced its constituency that the “EU road” was to their advantage, this group was also enthusiastic about the membership process. Now that the AKP government has achieved its goal – it has become the dominant force and no longer has to feel threatened by its domestic enemies – the EU prospect has been abandoned and the traditional Islamic-conservative articulation (with a nationalist

flavour) has re-emerged as the main component in the AKP rhetoric. EU bashing and anti-Western propaganda are the enduring elements of this tradition.

Concluding remarks

Turkish internal development has reached a point where the once-dominant ideal of making Turkey a European country has been thoroughly re-evaluated. For the current political elite, it is no longer a crucial component of collective identity-building, but rather a cost-and-utility calculation. The AKP leadership knows very well that a major part of its success is due to Turkey's economic boom during the last decade, and that this boom has been facilitated by opening Turkish markets to European investments and by gaining easy access to European markets. These calculations have produced a situation where the AKP keeps emphasizing its commitment to the EU project to international audiences, while in reality there is no genuine effort to that end.

However, there is nothing inevitable about the AKP's current position. It indeed came to power by generating a seemingly workable synthesis of universal liberal-democratic values and Turkey's "authentic" values. The attempt at building a new Turkey based on the idea of restructuring the state and society along neoliberal and liberal-democratic principles was the initial reason for the AKP's success.⁶ This formula for reform was also the main reason why Turkey's pro-European liberal intellectuals embraced the AKP and legitimized it both in Turkey and abroad. What currently characterizes the intellectual debate in Turkey is the disillusionment and the idea of being betrayed among the liberal circles due to the AKP's recent policies. It seems that the pro-European and pro-democracy coalition has indeed been shattered, and there is currently no guiding vision in Turkey, only severe polarization and even a climate of hatred between competing socio-political forces.

There is one rather telling part in the AKP's official party programme, composed at the beginning

of the 2000s, and which reads as follows: *Basic human rights and liberties have been achieved through humanity's centuries-long struggle. The level of these liberties demonstrates society's level of civilization. As part of the civilized world, the implementation of these liberties in Turkey is a social expectation. Therefore, these rights and liberties are implemented in Turkey not because some international organizations demand them, but because our nation is entitled to them.*⁷

This is the inclusive, rights-based political articulation that generated democratization and the consolidation of basic liberties during the period between 2002 and 2007. Its international backing came from the EU, as the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria was presented as the final stage of Turkey's long-held aspiration to become European. The key point here is that during the early years of the AKP regime, implementing the democratization reforms was, at least in principle, strongly supported by the AKP not only as a prerequisite for EU accession, but also because it served the AKP's attempt to empower its conservative supporters, often seen as being excluded socially and politically by the Kemalist regime. Currently, the AKP should implement its inclusive rights-based political agenda in a different context, where it has firmly consolidated its power. However, in this new situation the party seems unwilling to tolerate the rights and liberties of those who do not share its vision.

Where Turkey is ultimately heading under the AKP government is difficult to say. If EU membership is no longer actively sought, how does the AKP leadership envision Turkey's future place in the world? At the moment, it seems that the adherence to the neo-liberal economic policies is continuing, but the liberal-democratic reform agenda has been deemed unnecessary for Turkey's new power bloc and duly abandoned. Turkey's long-held EU vision, on the other hand, remains entrapped within the internal power struggle even though the immediate conflict has given way to unchallenged AKP hegemony. Within the minds of those who have outlined the AKP's foreign policy vision, such as Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, Turkey is destined to become a leader of

6 Atasoy, Yıldız (2009): *Islam's Marriage with Neoliberalism. State Transformation in Turkey*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.

7 Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi Programı (Justice and Development Party Programme), available at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/akparti/parti-programi#bolum>.

the Islamic civilization in the new world order. The AKP constituency seems to be satisfied as long as the economy prospers and their religious piety is established as the new norm within society. Thus, there is currently little societal pressure within the Islamic-conservative constituency that would force the AKP leadership to change its instrumental approach to the EU project. All critical voices, including those of the liberals who continue to demand the AKP to return to its initial EU-inspired reform agenda, are nowadays depicted as opponents of the “national will”.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
tel. +358 9 432 7000
fax. +358 9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi

ISBN 978-951-769-417-9

ISSN 1795-8059

Cover: Erman Akdogan/Flickr

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decision-making and public debate both nationally and internationally. The Institute undertakes quality control in editing publications but the responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.