

Reflections on some foreign policy dimensions of the Turkish coup attempt

*By Erzsébet N. Rózsa, STRATPOL Associate Fellow/Institute of World Economics
(Hungarian Academy of Sciences)*

On the evening of July 15, 2016 segments of the Turkish military attempted a coup d'état against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While many details have been revealed in the days that passed since – the President outmanoeuvred and escaped the putschists by half an hour only, his flight was miraculously not shot down by the military planes following it, the intelligence knew about the attempt, etc -, there are still many questions left unanswered. It is clear, however, that the President took a good political advantage of the situation and thousands of military officers, judges, teachers and journalists have been arrested (altogether 6,000 in one day and several thousands more later) on the scale that justifies calling the move a political purge. At the same time, the deans of all university faculties have been suspended, some universities even closed down, and public servants and teachers were forbidden to leave to country even if on holidays.

The coup attempt and the consequent political purge have come to rule the international agenda and have pushed other issues including terrorism and the attempt in Nice the day before, the attack on the train in Germany, the explosions in the Middle East, but even the first anniversary of the Iran nuclear deal or the Pledging Conference in Support of Iraq into the background. Turkey, which could be termed as one of the losers of the end of the Cold War, has come out of the quasi-neglect and disinterest, and has become a regional power and an unavoidable political actor, able to dictate the international agenda. Therefore,

the coup attempt and its consequences exceed by far the “purely” domestic political connotations of a state, or any state for that matter.

The democracy paradoxon

During and following the coup attempt not only the majority of the Turkish public and the Turkish opposition parties, but Turkey’s allies and neighbours as well, condemned the attempt against the democratically elected Turkish government and Erdoğan. Simultaneously, the Turkish President was severely criticized over the thousands of arrested and detained, the suspensions from state jobs and the state of emergency declared for three months. In the official Turkish standpoint all these measures were necessary in defence of the democratic order in Turkey. We cannot disregard the fact, however, that the EU position is rather condemning, even rejecting, both over the question of the restoration of the death penalty and the visa-free regime promised in the framework of the agreement on migration. As [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), the President of the EU Commission opined “Turkey, in its current state, is not in a position to become a member any time soon and not even over a longer period”.

All these events raise a series of questions, the most important of which is if Turkey still wants to join the European Union or if the Union still wants to see Turkey among its members. It should be noted that only one chapter has been closed since the accession negotiations started in 2005, while the opening of several others are blocked due to French and Cyprian demands. On the other hand, President Erdoğan has practically given an ultimatum to the EU, in which he defined 2023, the 100-year anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey as the final date for the accession. Should the process not be completed by then, Turkey will give up its EU membership efforts. This poses a serious dilemma for the European Union at least in two major questions: on the one

hand, Turkey under the leadership of the AKP and Erdoğan has evolved into a regional power ready to push for its interests. On the other hand, in the containment and management of the migration towards Europe, the European Union is in need of Turkish cooperation. In these “securitized” questions of an existential relevance for Europe, Erdoğan’s position –boosted by the successful prevention of the coup and by the Turkish public opinion, which has increasingly become Euro-sceptic in the last few years – has become even stronger vis-à-vis the EU, which has become increasingly “weightless” in the direct neighbourhood of Turkey (the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus).

The Syrian civil war and the “zero problem with the neighbours” policy

The demonstrations in 2011 starting as the Syrian Arab Spring soon turned into a civil war, in the framework of which several groups emerging in opposition to the government of Bashar al-Assad have been fighting not only against the government, but also with each other. The Syrian civil war was (is) in itself a threat to Turkey, but it also signalled the failure of the “zero problem with the neighbours” policy of Foreign Minister (later Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had previously developed a good personal relationship with Assad, and provided him advice in the Syrian Arab Spring, when the Syrian army stepped up against the demonstrators, came to the support of the “democratic opposition” and demanded Assad’s removal from office. It has soon turned out, however, that the Turks have put their bet on Assad’s fall too early. Assad, with the support of the Syrian minorities and the Sunni merchant middle class, who - among the increasingly radicalizing opposition groups - saw the guarantee of their survival in the Assad regime, is still in office. What’s more, the primary target of the international coalition is not him anymore, but the Islamic State, and the leaders of the international

community increasingly tend to accept Assad remaining in office for a certain periods part of any settlement plan. This is, in spite of the fact that in 2012 112 states announced that they would not acknowledge the Assad government as the representative of the Syrian people.

Analysts opine that the fact that several thousands of military officers were arrested following the coup attempt means that Turkey has given up any possible plan of any eventual intervention in Syria. (It should be noted that the Turkish parliament had previously authorized the Turkish military to conduct operations across the Turkish-Syrian border if necessary, but so far this authorization has not been made use of.) This seems to be further supported by the statement of Turkish Prime Minister [Binali Yıldırım](#), who said that in the fight against terrorism and for the sake of the stability of the region Turkey should have good relations with Syria. Taking into consideration that Turkey has recently started to improve its relations to Russia and Israel, many consider the Yıldırım statement as a kind of return to the “zero problem with the neighbours” policy, and remember that Turkey’s perception was best when it acted as a benevolent regional power mediating in the conflicts of the region.

The Kurds – are the allies of my allies my enemy?

Turkey’s biggest security challenge has always been, and still is, the Kurdish issue, which was put into a new context by the Syrian civil war. On the one hand, the Syrian Kurds living along the Turkish border have achieved a kind of autonomy, when in 2012 Bashar al-Assad withdrew the state security forces from the Syrian Kurdish territories. This is the second Kurdish autonomy (the first being the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government) along the Turkish borders, which forecast a new wave of Kurdish efforts at autonomy in Turkey. On the other hand, the armed Kurdish fighters in their struggle against the Islamic State

have gained a huge prestige and battle experience, and are supported by the international community including Turkey's most important NATO allies as well. The Kurds are practically the only armed force, which have from the beginning been fighting in the ground operations against the IS successfully, and since a war cannot be won from the air only, their relevance cannot be overestimated. (There have been many problems with the effectiveness and training of the central Iraqi army. The Syrian army, on the other hand, has not for years got into direct military contact with the Islamic State.) Further, the Kurdish battle for survival against the Islamic State at Kobane was looked on by the Turkish military deployed on the border. The non-intervention of the Turkish army in defence of the besieged Kurds at Kobane was one of the reasons that interrupted the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. The pro-Kurdish and pro-minority parliamentary party, the HDP condemned both the coup attempt and the atmosphere leading to it. Some hours later, however, three HDP offices were put on fire.

In the short term the conflict over the Kurdish issue is going to deepen, especially taking into consideration that in the 2015 November parliamentary elections Recep Tayyip Erdoğan yet again used/played the Kurdish card. In the medium to long term, however, there is no other solution than returning to the peace process halted by the Syrian situation. Especially since the international community and the United States will most certainly support the two Kurdish autonomies (in Iraq and in Syria) in acknowledgement of their achievements in the fight against the IS. (Even if the leaders of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government have not been invited to the Pledging Conference in Support of Iraq held in Washington.) Anyhow, the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government has had close – mostly economic – relations to Turkey. But for the AKP and Erdoğan himself the most important factor will be that approx. 16-18% of Turkey's

population are ethnic Kurds, many of whom are living outside the traditional Kurdish parts of the country, in the big cities and elsewhere. And it should not be forgotten either that the Kurds had supported the AKP and Erdoğan in more than one elections, were partners in the peace process in the framework of which several, mostly cultural rights could be gained.

Fethullah Gülen – a new tension in the US relations

The official Turkish opinion identified Turkish imam and preacher Fethullah Gülen as the mastermind behind the coup attempt. (Gülen was, for years, an ally of Erdoğan, but broke with him and has been living in the United States.) Gülen, on the other hand, condemned any measure threatening Turkish democracy and pointed to Erdoğan as the main arbitrator and beneficiary of the coup. Erdoğan has already asked the United States to return Gülen to Turkey and the Turkish authorities have sent the proofs of his involvement to the US. The openly publicized communication (TR – we have sent the proofs; US – we have not yet received them, without them we cannot send Gülen back; Gülen – I am ready to obey) seems at the moment a kind of playact, in the course of which every party is playing its obligatory role. However, the ultimate question will be what happens if Gülen is finally handed over to Turkey. It is not at all sure that Gülen's presence in Turkey will benefit Erdoğan. Should the death penalty be restored, Gülen will certainly be sentenced to death, but that will make a martyr out of him. (It should not be forgotten, however, that sentencing someone to death does not necessarily mean that the verdict is carried out. In spite of the fact that Turkey decided to give up the death penalty in 2002, which got into the constitution in 2004, since 1984 no death verdicts had been executed.) Should Gülen be sentenced to imprisonment, the question is what influence he would/could have on his followers. Another question is how big the eventual

influence of Gülen is in Turkey. Since Erdoğan broke with Gülen, there have been general elections in Turkey twice: in June 2015 the AKP received 40.87% of the votes (18,867,411 votes – 259 mandates), in November 2015 49.5% of the votes (23,681,926 votes – 317 mandates). Although the June 2015 results show a drop in the results as compared to the previous (2011) elections, when Erdoğan and Gülen were still cooperating, this did not threaten the AKP majority. And the November 2015 results exceeded those of 2011.

On the whole, Erdoğan has come out of the attempted coup even stronger and went on to use the reassuring external and internal support to forward not only his own personal aims, but to strengthen Turkey regional power status as well, thus providing a new democracy paradoxon. In the course of Turkey's foreign policy this may mean a return to the former "zero problem with the neighbours" policy. All the more so as Turkey's military power has suffered losses, even if these may prove temporary only. In a close connection, in medium to long-term there is no realistic alternative to the return to the Turkish-Kurdish peace process either.