

A Resilience Approach to a Failed Accession State: The Case of Turkey

by Sinan Ülgen

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “building resilience” in Turkey can be defined as improving the capacity of institutions and society to withstand and eventually seek to roll back a sustained challenge to democratic norms. From the perspective of Turkish society, the threat originates from the wide disparities in regional incomes that are themselves a by-product in the equally wide disparities in educational achievements and employable skills. Nevertheless, Turkish society retains important elements of resilience. This is the end result of a flawed and yet very real experience with multi-party democracy for over seven decades. At the same time Turkey is a failed accession state and the frustrations as well as the acrimony generated by this hapless state of affairs will have implications for any other EU engagement strategy with Ankara. It is therefore necessary to build the resilience action plan as a component of the formal Turkey–EU agenda, which is broader than the accession track. The soon-to-be-launched negotiations for the modernization of the EU–Turkey Customs Union provide a timely and useful option.

Turkey | Economy | Domestic policy | Civil society | Resilience | European Union

keywords

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1. The Turkish context

The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) for Foreign and Security Policy, "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe", identifies building "state and societal resilience to our East and South" as a central element of the EU's new foreign policy vision.¹ This paper will analyse the implications of this concept in the case of Turkey, seeking to identify both the challenges and potentially positive drivers for state and societal resilience in the country, while reflecting on the best means for the EU to engage Turkey in line with the objectives identified in the EUGS.

The application of the concept of "resilience" to Turkey requires a novel and creative frame of analysis. In contrast to all the other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Turkey is an EU accession country. In other words, Turkey remains the subject of the EU's historically most successful political transformation strategy, called enlargement. Yet in contrast to all previous candidates, the accession methodology is failing with Turkey. Initiated in 2005, membership talks have now stalled with little prospect of revitalization in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the first significant challenge of this analysis will be to realistically assess the implications of an approach focused on building "resilience" in relation to a country where the arguably stronger and more effective transformative project of accession has visibly failed.

¹ European Union External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/339>.

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A reason for the failure of the accession dynamic has been the regression in democratic standards witnessed in Turkey since the beginning of this decade. The Commission's yearly Progress Reports provide a stark reading in that respect.²

2. Defining state-centric resilience: De-democratization and weakening of institutions

Turkey's path to democracy has been characterized by a gradual, non-linear and difficult progress. What has characterized Turkey's culture of democracy has been an absence of consensus among the political elite on the rules of democracy and a genuine commitment to inclusive institutions to uphold these rules. Turkey's process of democratization has witnessed many episodes of breakdowns, transitions, crises and restorations. The frailty of democratic norms may be related to the top-down decision by state elites with aspirations to adopt European norms and standards to introduce democracy instead of its being the outcome of a long-term struggle by social groups that came to have increasing political efficacy and asked for a more open regime. But overall the Turkish body politic has been unable to generate a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of democratic politics. Democracy in Turkey has tended to be seen as a zero-sum game to control the state. Despite a long experience with the basic structures of democracy like regular elections, political players have been unwilling to move beyond this shallow interpretation of the democratic process. Electoral wins were seen as a sufficient justification to implement majority rule in a way that has increasingly emasculated the principle of checks and balances and the protection of minority viewpoints. This winner-takes-all approach to political life is now set to be consolidated, with a shift to a new constitutional setup that concentrates power at the top in an extreme version of a presidential system that is devoid of any genuine checks and balances.

The EU has been a powerful external actor stimulating internal reform in Turkey as long as the goal of accession retained its credibility. A virtual cycle of domestic reforms fuelled by aspirations for EU membership created this uniquely effective environment for a strengthening of Turkish democracy. As the EU's credibility started to weaken – with political barriers imposed by some EU leaders, the decision by former French president Nicolas Sarkozy to unilaterally suspend selected pillars of the negotiations, and the continuing difficulties created by the ongoing division of Cyprus – this pro-democracy dynamic lost its effectiveness. Since the 2011 elections, with the AKP securing yet another landslide victory, and particularly since the Gezi protests of 2013 and the botched coup attempt of July 2016, the degradation in democratic norms has gathered pace. Today, Turkey is mostly considered an illiberal democracy, as evidenced by a set of international indices that regularly compare governments' democratic performance.

² See, for instance, European Commission, *Turkey 2016 Report Accompanying the 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, Commission Staff Working Document (SWD/2016/366), 9 September 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52016SC0366>.

Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index. The index measures 167 countries scored on a scale of 0 to 10 based on 60 indicators. Scores of 0–4 indicate an authoritarian regime, 4–6 a hybrid regime, 6–8 a flawed democracy and 8–10 a full democracy.

Date	Score
2010	5.73
2011	5.73
2012	5.76
2013	5.63
2014	5.12
2015	5.12
2016	5.04

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2016*, <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

Freedom in the World Index. *Freedom in the World* is Freedom House's flagship annual report, assessing the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world. It is composed of numerical ratings and supporting descriptive texts for 195 countries and 14 territories.

Date	Status	Freedom rating*	Civil liberties*	Political rights*
2010	Partly free	3	3	3
2011	Partly free	3	3	3
2012	Partly free	3	3	3
2013	Partly free	3.5	4	3
2014	Partly free	3.5	4	3
2015	Partly free	3.5	4	3
2016	Partly free	3.5	3	4
2017	Partly free	4.5	4	5

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>.

Note: * rating: 1 = most free, 7 = least free.

Freedom of the Press Index. *Freedom of the Press*, an annual report on media independence around the world, assesses the degree of print, broadcast and digital media freedom in 199 countries and territories.

Date	Status	Score*	Legal environment**	Political environment***	Economic environment**
2010	Partly free	51	22	18	11
2011	Partly free	54	22	21	11
2012	Partly free	55	22	22	11
2013	Partly free	56	21	24	11

2014	Not free	62	23	26	13
2015	Not free	65	24	27	14
2016	Not free	71	26	30	15
2017	Not free	76	27	33	16

Source: Reporters Without Borders, *Freedom of the Press: Turkey Profile*, <https://freedomhouse.org/node/49602>.

Notes: * score: 0 = best, 100 = worst; ** score: 0 = best, 30 = worst; *** score: 0 = best, 40 = worst.

World Bank Voice and Accountability Index. The index reflects perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and the free media.

Date	Estimate*	Rank**
2010	-0.08	44.55
2011	-0.14	44.13
2012	-0.21	41.78
2013	-0.25	40.85
2014	-0.34	36.45
2015	-0.37	34.98
2016	-0.63	29.56

Source: World Bank, *Worldwide Governance and Indicators*, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#reports>.

Notes: * Estimate of governance ranges from approximately -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) governance performance. ** Percentile rank among all countries ranges from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest).

A key dynamic in this respect has been the weakening of institutions. Turkey's institutions have increasingly become unbalanced and skewed in favour of state power, at the expense of citizens' rights and meritocracy, executive limitations, transparency and accountability. The AKP's uninterrupted rule of fifteen years, and its efforts to be the sole influencer in all spheres, have amplified Turkey's institutional challenges.³ Its parliamentary majority has enabled the passing of bills and constitutional reforms, bypassing proper scrutiny by parliamentarians, let alone public consultation or wider debate. Of particular concern is the lack of independence and impartiality of the country's judiciary combined with a political power structure that is excessively dominated by the executive branch. The infiltration of Turkey's state institutions – and particularly law enforcement and the judiciary – by the Gülen network, an Islamic transnational religious and social

³ Izak Atiyas, "Economic Institutions and Institutional Change in Turkey during the Neoliberal Era", in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol. 47, No. 14 (Fall 2012), p. 57-81. See also Işık Özel, "Reverting Structural Reforms in Turkey: Towards an Illiberal Economic Governance?", in Senem Aydın-Düzgit et al., *Global Turkey in Europe III. Democracy, Trade, and the Kurdish Question in Turkey-EU Relations*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2015, p. 241-250 (IAI Research Papers 19), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4263>.

movement led by the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen who is also widely believed to be behind the failed July 2016 coup in Turkey, has certainly undermined the institutional resilience of the country. This infiltration, it has to be said, was carried out with the full backing of the ruling party for a long number of years. Not surprisingly, the purge of the state institutions of their Gülenist members, commenced in the wake of the botched coup of July 2016 and carried out under emergency rule, has compounded the human resources challenges of the Turkish public administration and weakened institutional capabilities.

The recently adopted constitutional changes following the April 2017 referendum are due to further erode the checks and balances in the political structure. The lack of a clear separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary is therefore heightening Turkey's risk of institutional disempowerment. A similar terminology can be used to describe the relationship between the central government and local authorities, where the Turkish body politic has been resistant to reforms to delegate more power to local leadership and insistent on maintaining the heavily centralized and increasingly politicized model of state governance.

In view of the degradation of democratic standards evidenced by these different studies, the concept of "building resilience" in the specific context of Turkey can be defined as improving the capacity of Turkish institutions and Turkish society to withstand and eventually seek to roll back a sustained challenge to democratic norms in the country.

The barriers to improvements in state and societal resilience in Turkey are arguably quite considerable. The extreme centralization of power is inimical to designs for the establishment of a genuinely democratic system recognizing the role of constitutional and institutional checks and balances. The overriding internal security challenges illustrated by the Gülen network's successful drive for state capture is also a real impediment for a transition to a more balanced, inclusive and accountable framework of governance.

However, the implementation of any pro-resilience reform agenda, in a country where the centralization of power is a key trend, will inevitably depend on the willingness of these exact actors to embrace such an agenda. In other words, while it is impossible to effect change in Turkey without engaging the central government and the political leadership, it is precisely the actions/ambitions of these actors that are constraining resilience.

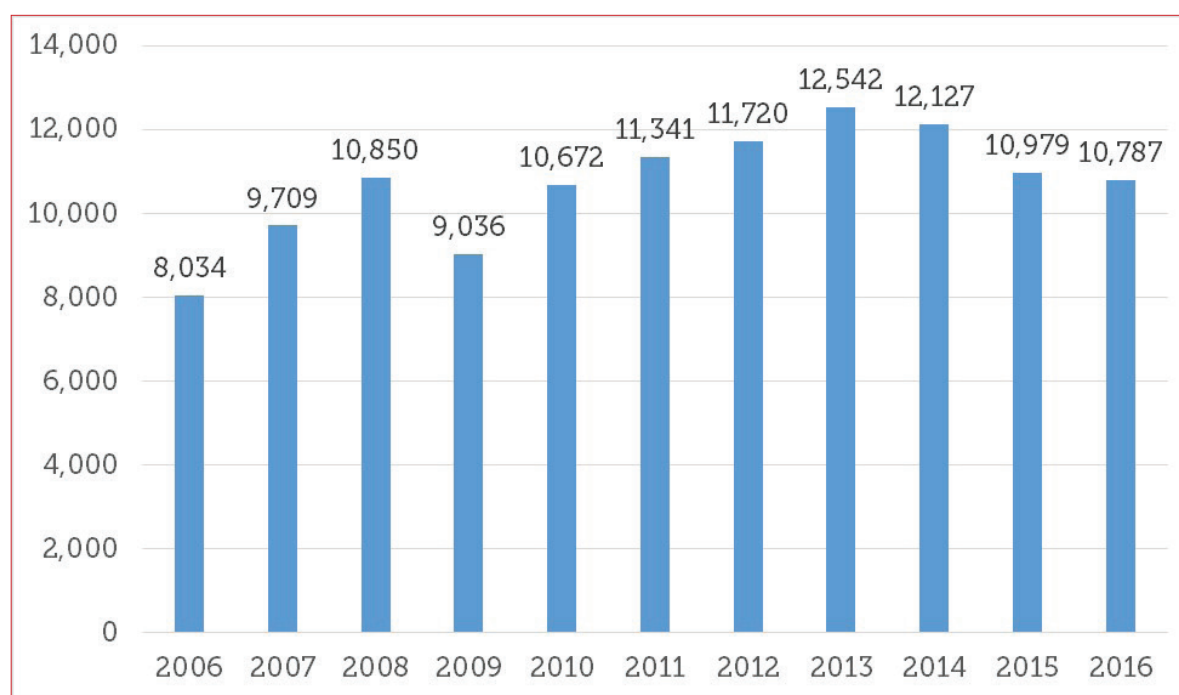
3. Defining socio-economic resilience: Slowing growth and rising disparities

From the perspective of Turkish society, the concept of "resilience" also has a very important socio-economic dimension. Economically, Turkey is categorized as a high-middle-income country by the World Bank. This means that Turkey has by

and large been successful in fighting poverty and elevating the average well being of its citizens. According to the World Bank, the poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines⁴ as a percentage of the total population dropped from 30 percent in 2002 to 1.4 percent in 2014. To put it in perspective in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this ratio was 25 percent for Egypt and 15.5 percent for Tunisia in 2010.⁵

In light of the above, the challenge from the standpoint of economic resilience is twofold. Firstly, the growth of economic affluence and convergence of per capita incomes with more developed nations has come to an end. Although the national economy is still growing at robust levels compared to European economies at a yearly average of 3 percent, the growth of personal incomes has stagnated. The per capita income in 2016 at 10,807 dollars was almost the same as the per capita income almost a decade ago in 2008.

Figure 1 | Turkey per capita incomes, 2006-2016 (in dollars)



Source: World Bank Data, *GDP per capita (current US\$)*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TR>.

Secondly, Turkey has been less successful in reducing income disparities. The Gini coefficient is a widely used measure of overall income inequality.⁶

⁴ National poverty lines reflect local perceptions of the level and composition of consumption or income needed to be non-poor. See World Bank Data, *Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population): Turkey*, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=TR>.

⁵ Latest available data.

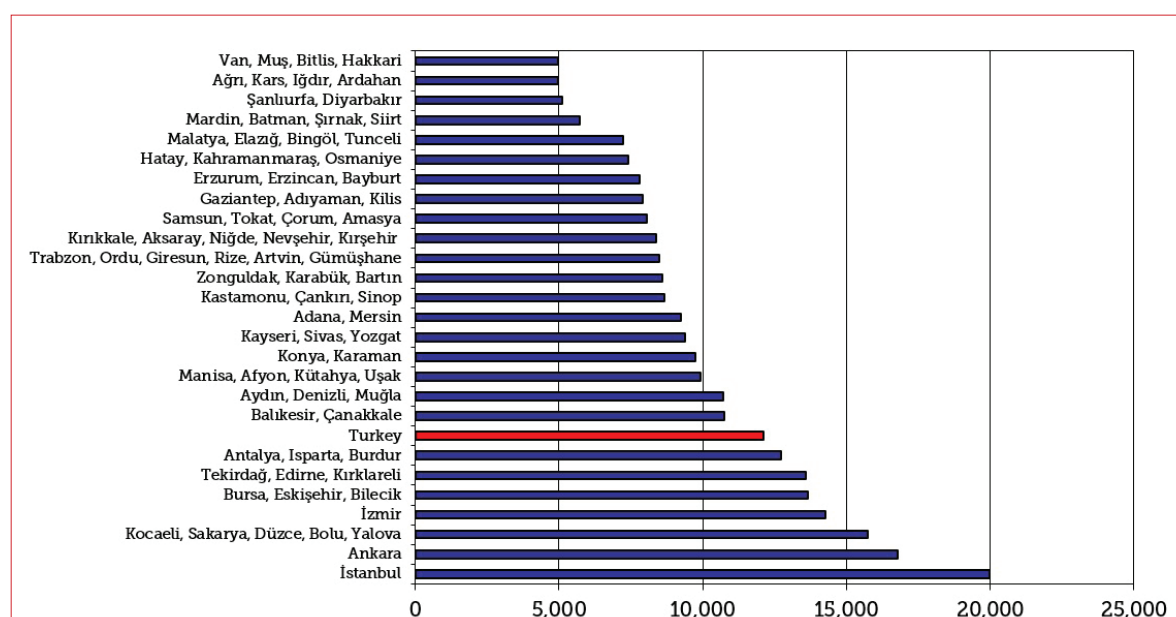
⁶ The Gini coefficient is a number between 0 and 1, where 0 corresponds to perfect equality and 1 to total inequality.

Table 1 | Turkey's Gini coefficient, 2006-2016

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
0.403	0.387	0.386	0.394	0.380	0.383	0.382	0.382	0.379	0.386	0.396

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), *Gini coefficient and S80/S20 ratio by household disposable income, 2006-2016*, http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=2354.

Accordingly, public policies have visibly failed to address income inequality in Turkey, with the Gini coefficient in 2015 being the same as in 2008. Corresponding Gini figures for MENA countries, for instance, were estimated by the World Bank as 0.30 for Egypt in 2008 and 0.35 for Tunisia in 2010. The enduring income discrepancy in Turkey has its roots in regional disparities. Turkey has long suffered from an inequitable regional development dynamic, with the country's metropolitan Western regions (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir) leading economic activity.

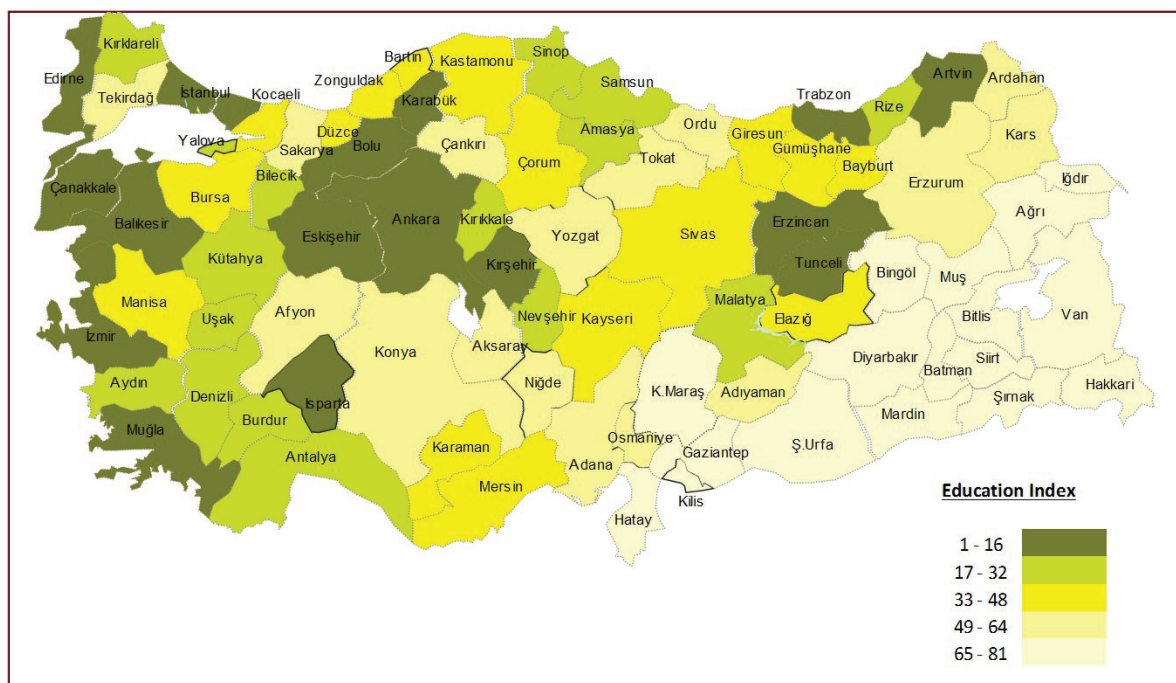
Figure 2 | Regional gross domestic product, 2014 (in dollars)


Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), *Gross Domestic Product Per Capita, Statistical Regions Level 2, 2004-2014*, http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreIstatistikTablo.do?istab_id=2523.

Despite long-term public policies designed to reduce regional disparities, the persistence of this gap points to more structural deficiencies in terms of human resources and educational outcomes. EDAM's work on regional competitiveness indicators illustrates these regional disparities.⁷ The "Regional Human Capital Index" is a proxy calculated on the basis of regional figures for schooling and quantitative figures of academic standards.

⁷ Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) and Deloitte, *A Competitiveness Index for Turkish Regions. Executive Summary*, March 2009, <http://edam.org.tr/?p=2682>.

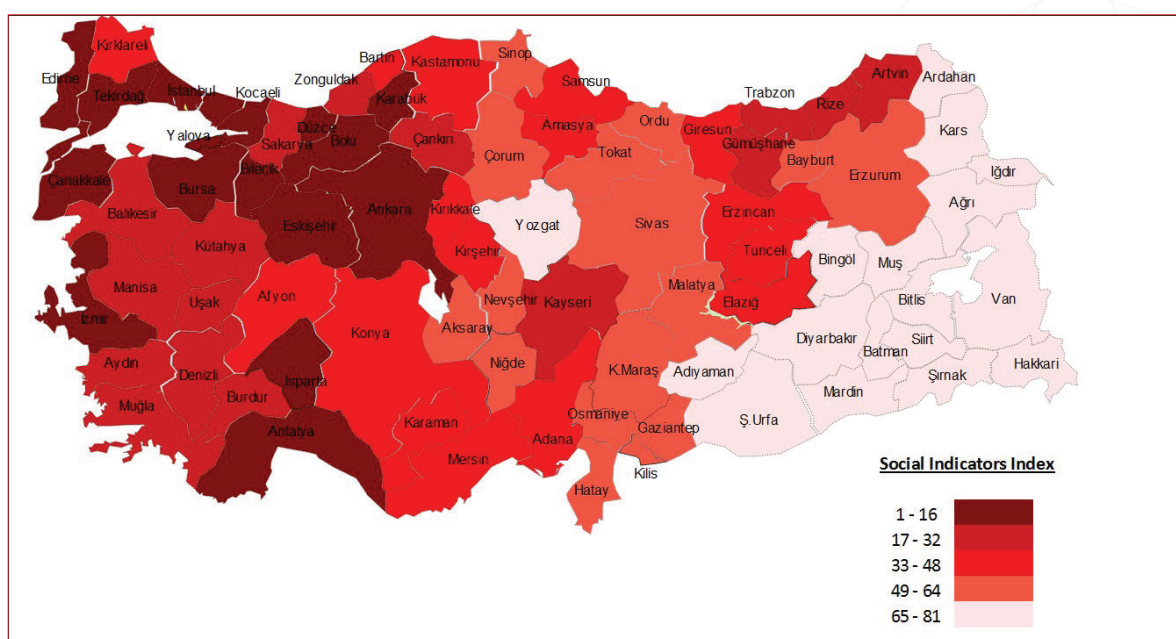
Figure 3 | Regional Human Capital Index rankings



Source: EDAM and Deloitte, *A Competitiveness Index for Turkish Regions*, cit.

Similarly, the “Regional Social Capital Index” is a proxy calculated on the basis of regional indicators of social engagement such as number of civil society organizations per head and health environment, as well as human capital indicators such as women’s schooling rates and the literacy rate.

Figure 4 | Regional Social Capital Index rankings



Source: EDAM and Deloitte, *A Competitiveness Index for Turkish Regions*, cit.

Therefore the threat to social resilience in Turkey originates from the wide disparities in regional incomes that are themselves a by-product of the equally wide disparities in educational achievements and employable skills.

4. Positive contributions to resilience

Politically, despite being under pressure, Turkish society retains important elements of resilience. This is the end result of a flawed and yet very real experience with multi-party democracy for over seven decades. Firstly there has been an anchoring of a shallow but real set of democratic norms. All political actors, for instance, established a common front to resist the attempted military coup of July 2016. Today, despite having a chequered history of military intervention in democratic life, the Turkish body politic as well as society is averse to any military role in politics. Secondly, not only opposition political parties but also civic movements have in recent years improved their capacity to organize peaceful resistance movements. The Gezi protests of 2013 are the most vivid example of the vibrancy and pluralism of civil-society-led peaceful dissent. The “No” campaign during the constitutional referendum – which was managed, under heavy government pressure, by a multitude of independent actors including political parties (the main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP) but also civil society movements like Demokratik Itiraz Hareketi (Democratic Dissent Movement) – is another indication of these remaining sources of societal resilience. Finally, the “Justice March” led by the CHP against the politicization of the judiciary, which after a 450 km walk from Ankara to Istanbul was able to orchestrate a rally with over 1 million participants, is yet another illustration of this potential for grassroots activism.

4.1 Society

The Turkish business community and its umbrella organizations (primarily the Turkish Industry and Business Association TÜSIAD and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges TOBB) remain key societal actors in terms of resilience. The Turkish economy is quite open with the total of imports and exports reaching 40 percent of national income. It is also a diversified economy with growing but still relatively low levels of state control. The combination of these features has created a business class, independent of the government, that has acted as a counterweight in policy making. Their role has not been exclusively limited to the economic field. TÜSIAD for instance has been in the vanguard of this trend with its agenda and publications focused also on rule of law, good governance and structural reforms.⁸ Although the weight of these institutions in overall policy shaping has been

⁸ Some examples include a study on judicial reform entitled *Yargı Hizmetlerinde Kalite: Yargı Hizmetlerinde Kalite Talebi ve Kalite Unsurları*, published in December 2014, and a policy paper on reforming the education system entitled *PISA 2012 Değerlendirmesi: Türkiye için Veriye Dayalı Eğitim Reformu Önerileri*, published in April 2014.

diminishing due to the growing centralization of power, they remain influential and active members of the civil society universe in Turkey. Also, the ability of these business associations to engage the government should improve at a time when Turkey's growth performance is expected to come under increased strain driven by changes in the global and regional context.

Professional bodies representing liberal professions like the Union of Turkish Bar Associations (Türkiye Barolar Birliği, TBB) and the Turkish Medical Association (Türk Tabipleri Birliği, TTB) have been vocal entities in the public debate on democratic rights. The size of their membership and the widespread local network of chapters have enabled these organisations to remain relevant actors at the national as well as the local levels of policy making. In addition, unlike many other civil society organizations that have been set up as associations or foundations, these professional bodies have a founding legal act that gives them added prestige and credibility in their public endeavours.

4.2 State

Although Turkey has a highly centralized state structure, it also has close to 3,000 local authorities ranging from metropolitan municipalities like Istanbul and Izmir to district-level municipalities. In contrast to the central government, where since 2002 a single party has been at the helm, the power distribution at the level of local government is more diverse. According to results of the 2014 local elections, the ruling AKP won municipal elections in 18 out of Turkey's 30 metropolitan municipalities. This means that Turkish opposition parties presently govern twelve metropolitan municipalities. This set includes large cities like Izmir, Edirne, Adana and Diyarbakir. Depending on the leadership skills of the mayors, some of these local governments have emerged as important hubs of resilience. Izmir, for instance, is a case in point. With a well-managed budget and a strong backing by the local population, this Aegean city has launched a range of sustainable initiatives in areas like culture, women's empowerment and smart cities that have had an influence over other local governments, some of which have adopted similar initiatives.

Opposition parties are to be considered as another pillar of political resilience. For a long time now, Turkey's parliamentary opposition has been rightly branded as ineffective in the political landscape. After a series of electoral losses, however, the opposition has gradually improved its strategy and operational capabilities. Most recently, the main opposition party was able to orchestrate an ambitious example of civic activism with CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu vanguarding the 450 km march from Ankara to Istanbul that culminated in a 1 million strong rally. Even more importantly, the political opposition has become more adept at building a common platform to challenge the ruling AKP government, particularly on issues

like the rule of law and the quest for justice.⁹

5. Operationalizing resilience: Modernizing the EU-Turkey Customs Union

Once the concept of “building resilience” has been defined for the specific case of Turkey, the next question relates to the operationalization of this concept. What EU-led policy instruments can be used to achieve these objectives in Turkey?

The answer will need to be contextualized for the Turkish case, which presents a unique set of challenges. Turkey is a large country with a population nearing 80 million. No external actor can directly target Turkish society as the object of its set of engagement strategies and hope to create a meaningful impact. This is not just a consequence of the size of the country. The political culture is also inimical to such large-scale bottom-up engagement strategies. The imperial Ottoman heritage and the still omnipresent trauma of the dismantling of the empire in the nation’s consciousness have created a political culture deeply sceptical of foreign involvement. Turks remain suspicious of foreigners. Turkey’s republican history also demonstrates that change can be triggered by a more indirect approach built around a state-led reform agenda.

Yet at the same time, Turkey is a failed accession state and the frustrations as well as the acrimony generated by this hapless state of affairs will have implications for any other engagement strategy with Ankara. This means in practice that the instruments devised for the “resilience” approach will need to operate in a political space that is still formally defined by the framework of accession. Secondly, the receptiveness on the side of the Turkish government to any element of this “resilience” focused agenda is likely to be low. All the more so since the government is essentially responsible for the backsliding in democratic norms described in the previous sections, and is therefore largely identified as the major challenge to building state and societal resilience in the country. Finally, Turkey has a GDP of around 750 billion dollars and a government budget around 220 billion, meaning that the amount of EU financial assistance that can realistically be linked to the “resilience” strategy is going to be comparatively marginal and thus of constrained effectiveness in fostering compliance. The overall challenge for the implementation of the “resilience” strategy will therefore be the design of an engagement framework that can still deliver outcomes in this constrained political environment.

Despite the envisaged difficulty of engaging Ankara, there seems to be no other viable option for the resilience approach to succeed. Turkey is just too big and too populous for an exclusively non-government-centric engagement strategy to

⁹ Amberin Zaman, “No Time for Rest As Turkey’s Justice March Reaches Istanbul”, in *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2017, <http://almon.co/2w08>.

yield concrete benefits, at least at the desired scale. This does not mean that civil society should be excluded. On the contrary an inclusive approach is indispensable for any measure of success. It does however mean that the government cannot be excluded as the focal actor in the implementation of the strategy. In other words, the different programmes and actions that will eventually be defined as part of this new framework of engagement will continue to rely on the Turkish government and its agencies as the essential implementing body. The difficulty will be to create an incentive structure for Ankara to willingly partner with the EU in the implementation of the resilience programme.

The only realistic option, in this particular case, would be to build the resilience action plan as a component of the formal Turkey–EU agenda, which is broader than the accession track. In particular, with prospects of improving the rule of law and introducing ambitious structural reforms, the soon-to-be-launched negotiations for the modernization of the customs union provide a timely and useful option for integrating the resilience approach in the Turkey–EU relationship.

The aim of this new set of negotiations will be to overhaul the existing customs union with a view to extending its scope of sectoral coverage by including service industries, agriculture and public procurement as well as modernizing the overall governance framework by designing a new dispute settlement mechanism and addressing deficiencies in trade policy convergence.¹⁰ Viewed from the perspective of resilience, the renewed customs union can provide a strong foundation for the strengthening of the rule of law, at least in the policy areas that are to be covered by the new agreement. As opposed to the accession track where the enhancement of democratic norms and the rule of law is an explicit objective, the modernization of the customs union can have the upgrading of the rule of law as an implicit objective. In other words, the proper implementation of Turkey's commitments under the modernized customs union can indeed lead to improvements in the rule of law.

One key question in this context is whether Ankara can be incentivized to accept this regime of improved governance that will inevitably constrain discretionary rule in sensitive areas like public procurement practices or services deregulation. In the end, Ankara can eventually feel obliged to accept this proposition if the prospect of a failure of the customs union negotiations is perceived as a major threat for the growth prospects of the Turkish economy. In other words, Turkish policy makers may ultimately become resigned to accepting the terms of a renewed customs union incorporating changes in public procurement rules and an overhauled dispute settlement mechanism if they can be convinced that the overhauled customs union will help Turkey to overcome the peril of low growth.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Impact Assessment Accompanying the document Recommendation for a Council Decision authorising the opening of negotiations with Turkey on an Agreement on the extension of the scope of the bilateral preferential trade relationship and on the modernisation of the Customs Union. Commission Staff Working Document (SWD/2016/475)*, 21 December 2016, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/155238.htm>.

Ultimately this challenge of sustaining growth, which has been a key factor driving the political popularity of the AKP leadership, may compel Turkish policy makers to review their approach to governance. In the long term, Turkey can only overcome this challenge if a more resilient framework of governance that enhances inclusiveness, accountability and the rule of law with full-fledged democratic constraints on the use of executive power can be established.

Updated 24 October 2017

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