

EU-TURKEY RELATIONS: WHICH FUTURE?

A podcast with Alper Kaliber

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What are the defining features of populism in Turkish foreign policy and how relevant is anti-Westernism?

“Turkish populism, in fact, is a kind of mixed populism. As you know, right-wing populism is often identified with nativism that seeks to control immigration and a rejection of cultural and global economic globalization. Left-wing populism often advocates more anti-Western and anti-U.S. positions and opposes neoliberalism and open markets.

In fact, although the Turkish government is a right-wing government, Turkish populism exhibits a mix of the left-wing and right-wing populism. For instance, regarding immigration, the main opposition social democratic party is following a much more populist path than the government.

So the Turkish case is a bit complicated, but it has manifested various important characteristics of populist regimes. For instance, the ideology of nativism characterizes Turkish populism; also distrust towards, or even securitization of, the institutions of global governance has an important place in Turkish populism. So in this populism, there is an important role played by anti-Western attitudes and discourse, because the government, I think, believes that this is 'bought' by the public in Turkey.

In fact, from the Ottoman times onwards, there was always a kind of anti-Western discourse, or anti-Western skepticism, in Turkish politics. Many governments have used and abused this. The AKP government is basically of the opinion that this is still a selling strategy in Turkey. So most probably, in the near future, we will continue to see that this anti-Westernism is going to be an important part of the populist discourse in Turkey.”

You argue that populism in Turkish foreign policy grew in significance in the last few years. So what were the reasons for this increased emphasis on populism and anti-Westernism in recent times?

“That is the complicated intermingling of domestic and international visions. Basically, the AKP government came to power by articulating the demands of democratization and Europeanization. Since 2011 these democratic ambitions and reforms were just put on shelves and, especially since the Gezi Park demonstrations of 2013, Turkish society has become a more closed society.

The Gezi Park demonstrations were very important because it was a mass public opposition to government. Especially the then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had devised a very anti-Western discourse because he believed that, behind these demonstrations, there was a sort of Western hand.

After the failed coup d'état in July 2016, the government followed a more authoritarian policy in Turkey. Many policy makers were of the opinion that the Turkish stance against the coup plotters was not supported by the West. Turkey couldn't get the anticipated and desired support from the West; even the Gulen movement which was behind this coup attempt was believed to be supported by some Western powers.

As the authoritarian tenets of the regime in Turkey increased, the government needed more populism, because you always have to create some enemies endangering Turkey's survival. The government needed a rally round the flag effect, actually, because before that, the government legitimized itself through the reforms of democratization and Europeanisation. But this agenda no longer works, not at all. And now the government had some other reasons to legitimize its existence and power in the system: a kind of anti-Western populism.

You know, Turkey remained under the regime of state of emergency for two years. Even if this state of emergency was lifted formally, in fact, due to different reasons we are still under a kind of state of emergency regime. And in this regime, the government, to legitimize and reproduce itself as an authoritarian regime, still needs anti-Western populism.”

Do you believe that anti-Western populism will become a long term feature of Turkish foreign policy, or is a policy reversal possible in the short to medium term?

“I need to answer this question at two different levels, the policy level and the discursive level. Politicians often use harsh discourses, you know, against some countries or some blocs while they're negotiating with them behind closed doors. So at the discursive level, I don't expect any major transformation for the short and even medium term.

But on the other hand, at the policy level, Turkey cannot really break with the West. Yes, Turkey tries to diversify its policy options. You know, it approaches Russia, it develops some mutual policy with Russia in Syria, and renews its military-industrial war technology through Russian jet planes and other military facilities. Turkey also has a military base in Qatar, and now it has an agreement of military and maritime security with the Government of national accord in Tripoli.

So Turkey tries to diversify its instruments, because it also believes that it is sort of encircled by Greece, Israel and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. These countries are also supported by the EU. So Turkey tries to diversify its instruments of foreign policy.

But on the other hand, even though the Turkey-EU relations are in a very bad state, these relations will certainly continue because Turkey and the EU need each other on different occasions and for different issues like terrorism, migration, major security issues. So there is a kind of functional cooperation between these two. For Turkey, frankly, I don't expect too much transformation, but in the medium term we can expect a kind of softening of these relations because the two sides need each other. And as you know, the Turkish economy is not going well. Economic-wise, Turkey needs the European market and vice versa. So in the medium term, we can expect an amelioration and softening of relations, but at the discursive level, this will most probably take more time.

Much depends on the government's choices. I mean, in Turkey the government, the current government at least, has two choices. One of them is to follow a more rational path to tackle the economic issues, economic difficulties, because so many people in Turkey are of the opinion that Turkey now is experiencing an economic crisis. On this path, you don't need populism, you don't need further discussion or further strained and tough relations with the EU countries.

But the other path that the government could follow - and most probably the government will continue down this path - is to continue with this kind of anti-Western populist discourses, while covering or hiding or masking some important grievances in Turkey. So most probably, the government will follow this path because it does not have any self-confidence anymore.

Also, Turkey now has a one-man show. As you know, in 2017, there was a referendum. And after this referendum, Turkey's parliamentary regime was replaced by a presidential regime. This is an awkward presidential regime because there is no checks and balances. And the EU made it clear that if Turkey implements these constitutional amendments and sustains this presidentialism à la Turca then no amelioration of the relations between these two could be expected. So I don't see any optimistic future for Turkish democracy nor any reason for optimism in Turkey-EU relations in the immediate future.”