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## OPINION


# 10 Reasons Why the EU Needs to Have a Master Plan for the Post-Erdogan Era

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\*This Opinion was written by **Ebubekir ISIK** and **Mustafa Yilmaz Karabayir** | 24 September 2021

 Rue de la Loi 155, 1040 Brussels

 [office@vocaleurope.eu](mailto:office@vocaleurope.eu)

 + 32 02 588 00 14

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## VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



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# 10 REASONS WHY THE EU NEEDS TO HAVE A MASTER PLAN FOR THE POST-ERDOGAN ERA

## Introduction

As he approaches his twentieth year in power, President Erdogan's popularity is at an all-time low, 38 percent approval rate<sup>1</sup>, and significant socioeconomic and political indicators, as well as health issues, signal that the post-Erdogan era in Turkey is approaching. However, the European Union's (EU) failure to take concrete steps to address Erdogan Administration's violations of democratic norms, along with its treatment of Turkey primarily as a refugee guardian rather than an accession country, has led to a growing opposition bloc in Turkey holding the EU partially responsible for Turkey's current situation.

In fact, the latest visit paid by Oliver Varheyli, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, once again proves that the EU does not have any projection for the post-Erdogan era. More precisely, the Commissioner's agenda during his visit to Turkey allowed him to meet only his official counterparts from the Erdogan Administration whereas he did not meet any opposition leader including the main opposition party.

More interestingly, the Commissioner did not prefer to touch upon some of the key challenges such as backsliding of democratic norms and human rights during his meetings with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, and Deputy Foreign Minister Faruk Kaymakci. In fact, this visit, which is a reflection of the EU's ongoing approach to the Turkish government, has once again massively contributed to the anti-EU sentiment not only among the opposition coalition but also even among the larger progressive segments of the society that are known to be traditionally in favour of Turkey's EU accession process.

This being said there is no doubt that any future transition of power from the Erdogan Administration to an opposition alliance and its possible implications are going to be significant for the EU because although President Erdogan has been vocally advocating the contrary in public, he has always managed to come to the common terms with the European Union on many key issues of confrontation, often at the expense of Turkey's national interest. The fact is that while President Erdogan has been announcing repeatedly that Turkey will not be Europe's refugee warehouse, he has agreed to keep more than four million refugees in Turkey in exchange for financial assistance from the EU, which distorts the positive perception of millions of Turks vis-a-vis the European Union.

Given the Turkish opposition's views on the EU on certain policies, especially regarding the refugee issue, it became clear that if the power in the upcoming election changes hands in Turkey, the EU's relationship with the future Turkish government may deteriorate, potentially jeopardizing the EU's interests on several of its top priorities.

## 10 Reasons for President Erdogan's Diminishing Electoral Support

The ten reasons emphasized below are not the only reasons that contribute to President Erdogan's popularity eroding; instead, they should be considered as several of the most salient ones.

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<sup>1</sup><https://bianet.org/english/politics/249463-president-erdogan-s-job-approval-at-lowest-level-in-six-years-poll-shows>

## Economic Downfall

Economic development was one of the most important, arguably the most important contributors to the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rising popularity during its first 10 years in the office. Macroeconomic indicators improved significantly as a result of early structural reforms; in fact, GDP per capita under AK Party government hit an all-time high of 12,615 USD<sup>2</sup> in 2013, while inflation and unemployment rates were 7.5%<sup>3</sup> and 8.73%<sup>4</sup>, respectively.

However, the government's authoritarian decisions during the Gezi Park protests in mid-2013, as well as the incremental transition to a "one-man regime" through the Presidential System with no proper check and balances following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, can be regarded not only as pivotal moments in Turkish politics but as well as in Turkish economy. Gradually, the Central Bank's independence has dwindled, and instead of more productive and innovative sectors, the construction sector, particularly contractors with close links to the government, has grown its share of resource allocation. Consequently, the Central Bank's net reserves, foreign exchange reserves eroded drastically, the Turkish economy's attractiveness to foreign investors has worsened, and macroeconomic indicators for 2020 reached their lowest levels in 10 years. In fact, GDP per capita decreased to 8,538 USD, a 32.3% decrease compared to 2013. Officially, inflation and unemployment rates were 12.28 % and 13.92 %, respectively, but there is a widespread perception among the public that the true figures should be substantially higher.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these changes, the Turkish Lira has depreciated substantially against the US dollar, from 1.8 USD/TL in early 2013 to 8.47 USD/TL in September 2021, which is a significant contributor to Turkey's overall hyperinflation throughout the stated period. According to Metropoll's November 2020 polls, 63.7% believe the Turkish economy is on a downward trajectory. More troubling is the fact that, while 68.9% of those polled feel structural reforms are needed for the economy, rule of law and democracy; 60% are sceptical of the government's announcement that "we will initiate a new reform process".<sup>6</sup>

## Fall of Democratic Values

The Gezi Park protests in mid-2013 can be seen as the event at which the government's authoritarian tendencies were clearly visible for the first time, and Turkey's backsliding from democratic principles accelerated. The government's disproportionate use of force against the right to democratic protest has been among the pivotal moments in Turkish democracy. Turkey likewise has a poor image when it comes to corruption. Became salient with the 17-25 December 2013 Corruption Investigations, news of corruption and unjust enrichment involving President Erdogan's family, the ten four cabinet ministers, high-ranking officials, and businesspeople with close links to the government have become

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<sup>2</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TR>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=TR>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263708/unemployment-rate-in-turkey/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2021/07/31/prices-in-turkey-are-surg-ing-but-by-how-much>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.internethaber.com/metropoll-den-ekonomi-anketi-turkiye-kotuye-gidiyor-diyenler-buyuk-cogunluk-foto-galerisi-2147243.htm?page=6>

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increasingly prominent. As a result, Turkey was one of the countries that lost the most points in the corruption perception index between 2012 and 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Another critical event that adversely damaged democratic values, fundamental rights, and freedoms in Turkey was the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. Following the coup attempt, hundreds of thousands of people were imprisoned for months without due process, the government gained a monopoly on media, and numerous opposition journalists were imprisoned for their criticisms. Furthermore, the instance of party closure case and the lifting of opposition deputies' immunity all highlighted how far Turkish democracy has deteriorated.

It should be noted that, as another crucial event, the government's cancellation of the Istanbul mayoral election in 2019 was viewed by the large portion of Turkish electorate as an unjust interference with the democratic choice of the society; in consequence, opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu won the re-run election by a much greater margin. As a result of all the above, today only 45 percent believe that Turkey is a democratic country according to the 2021 Democracy Perception Index.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Collapse of the Key Public Institutions**

As the new Presidential system gradually became dominant, institutions lost their power and functioning. Additionally, the removal of thousands of public employees assumed to be the members of the Gülen organization, which the government held accountable for the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, and the following unqualified appointments to thousands of public vacancies, undermined the public institutions' functionality and efficiency even more. For a while, President Erdogan has the power to appoint and dismiss ministers with a single decree; for instance, the governor of the Central Bank changed for the third time in the last two years. As a result, citizens have lost confidence in many public institutions. In fact, the Istanbul Economics Research study found that between January 6th and April 7th, 2021, trust in the parliament fell from 44 percent to 40 percent, trust in the presidency fell from 51 percent to 44 percent, and trust in the Central Bank of Turkey fell from 41 percent to 32 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Turkey ranked 80th out of 102 nations in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index in 2015, while the country dropped to 107th out of 128 countries in 2020.<sup>10</sup> Especially after the shift to the Presidential System, the People's Alliance, which is the ruling block of AK Party and its ally Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), reached a stage where they could determine almost entirely the appointment of judges and prosecutors. This resulted in a system in which loyalty, rather than merit takes priority, severely undermining the judiciary's independence. Consequently, recent polls show that more than 75% of the public has no trust in the judiciary.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.seffalik.org/cpi2020/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dw.com/tr/2021-demokrasi-alg%C4%B1-endeksi-y%C3%BCzde-45-t%C3%BCrkiyenin-demokratik-odu%C4%9Funa-inan%C4%B1yor/a-57438415>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.turkiyeraporu.com/arastirma/kamu-kurumlarina-guven-2-3932/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dw.com/tr/15-temmuzdan-sonra-yarg%C4%B1-nas%C4%B1-de%C4%9Fi%C5%9Fti/a-58269963>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ekrangazetesi.com/haber/21962/orcnin-iste-son-secim-anketi-yargiya-guveniyor-musunuz-sorusuna-ise-yuzde-749-hayir-dedi.html>

## **Losing Touch with Realities of the Society**

Prior to taking the government, the AKP was known as a party that had the most connection with people, understood their concerns, and was able to provide realistic policy-solutions to solve many long-standing problems facing the Turkish society, which helped AK Party under Erdogan win the elections consecutively since 2001. President Erdogan's connection with the people has steadily reduced over time, he has lost touch with realities of the society, and now, the Erdogan Administration has grown into a government that is distant from understanding the demands of the masses.

The most visible manifestations of this are the government's decreasing involvement with the society and attention paid to their concerns; meanwhile, extravagant expenditure on palaces and ministers while a significant number of people are unemployed and/or have incomes that fall below the poverty line. Several polls<sup>12</sup> reveal that economic woes such as inflation and unemployment, especially youth unemployment, have been two of the most pressing worries among the public for some time; nevertheless, measures to address these issues have been far from practical, exacerbating the problem.

In light of these developments, young people, in particular, noticed that they are unlikely to encounter promising improvements in Erdogan Administration to better their future.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, particularly in the last 10 years, government expenditure on productive investments, such as in education, renewable energy and digitalization that may benefit the entire society has gradually decreased; rather, such spending and the government's megaprojects primarily aim to enrich a small number of people with strong links to the government.

## **Geopolitical Isolation - "Precious Loneliness"**

There is no doubt that strong diplomatic ties would be beneficial for a country like Turkey, facing massive geopolitical challenges in its neighbouring region; however, mercurial foreign policy decisions, particularly in the last five years, have aggravated Turkey's diplomatic relations with its traditional partners and allies, pushing the country further into geopolitical isolation.

The country's track record of violating fundamental rights and freedoms, its military-led drilling activities for gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean have adversely affected ties with the EU. Furthermore, the Pasteur Brunson crisis in August 2018, the ongoing tensions over the S-400 missile system and Halkbank's criminal proceedings have strained relations with the United States. In addition, Turkey's military engagement in Syria and Libya came at a high economic and political cost to the country. Consequently, mismanagement of foreign policy has had severe negative repercussions over time, not only on Turkey's foreign policy objectives, but also on the country's economic conditions, eventually becoming a socioeconomic burden on the society.

## **Growing Defiance by Women Due to Violence Against Women and Femicide**

Violence against women and femicide has been prevalent in Turkey for a long time now; nevertheless, the number of instances increased throughout the AKP era, becoming a major social problem. While

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/metropollden-son-anket-turkiyenin-en-onemli-sorunu-ekonomi-ve-issizlik-1835470>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.dw.com/en/generation-z-turkey/a-54057490>

there were 66 women murdered in Turkey in 2002, the year the AKP came to power, the quantity of femicides has increased considerably since then, reaching 474 in 2019.<sup>14</sup> The government's failure to impose deterrent penalties in cases of violence against women and femicide raises serious concerns in the society that such incidents will continue to rise.

According to the TURKSTAT study, more than half of the women who participated in the study feel that the environment they live in is not safe.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Erdogan Administration's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, a treaty to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, is opposed by 64 percent of the population<sup>16</sup>, in March 2021, makes the administration the primary culprit for the deterioration of the situation and has prompted millions of women to take a stand against the AKP.

### **Mismanagement of the Corona Pandemic**

During the pandemic, the Erdogan administration, which traditionally favoured economic recovery above public health, failed in both public health and economic recovery metrics. From January to March 11, 2020, although coronavirus infections throughout the world grew drastically; very surprisingly, not a single case was recorded in Turkey. The Ministry of Health's failure to provide data transparently from the beginning and documenting COVID deaths differently than WHO standards lowers the real number of deaths.

Along with the manipulated statistics, the Erdogan Administration's permit and participation in various crowded events have had a negative influence on the society's compliance with pandemic measures. In addition, falling behind with vaccine supplies, especially the Pfizer-Biontech vaccine, in the later stages has exacerbated the severity of the pandemic. Because Turkey is already grappling with soaring poverty rates, finding the balance between public health and the economy has been challenging. Therefore, the two-week lockdown urged by professional groups and experts in Turkey, which would severely restrict life, including the production process, never happened, and should be considered a major cause of the rise in daily cases and mortality statistics.

In addition, due to the accumulated economic issues from past years, the government failed to provide sufficient aid, compared to similar sized economies, to employers and employees forcing thousands to lose their jobs or shut down their businesses. During the early stages of the epidemic, a Presidential Science Committee composed of medical specialists from various disciplines was created, but the main approach in the decision-making process has been to execute President Erdogan's directives, not the experts'. As polls indicate, Erdogan Administration bears most of the responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic's mismanagement from the public eye.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/chp-raporu-akp-iktidari-doneminde-en-az-7-bin-600-kadin-olduruldu-haber-1505501>

<sup>15</sup><https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Kadin-2020-37221>

<sup>16</sup><https://tr.euronews.com/2020/07/25/metropoll-anketi-halk-n-yuzde-64-u-hukümetin-istanbul-sozlesmesi-nden-cekilmesini-onaylam>

<sup>17</sup><https://tr.euronews.com/2020/05/01/covid-19-anketi-turkiye-de-her-4-kisiden-3-u-ac-klan-an-salgin-verilerine-guvenmiyor>

## **Mishandling of Refugee Politics**

Turkey has accepted Syrian refugees as a result of foreign policy decisions, possibly foreign policy mistakes, since 2011, and the overall official number of Syrian refugees with temporary protected status reached 3.702 million as of August 2021. Thus, the total number of refugees accounts for approximately 4.5 percent of Turkey's population, making Turkey the world's largest refugee host country and generating a plethora of demographic, social, and economic difficulties.

Furthermore, Turkey is presently dealing with a new migrant flow from Afghanistan, which amplifies Turkish citizens' concerns. More precisely, the Erdogan government initially denied the viral video footage<sup>18</sup> of large numbers of Afghan males passing across Turkey's Van border; however, after a while, acknowledging that the country is dealing with a migrant influx from Afghanistan via Iran. Contradictory remarks from prominent authorities on such a sensitive issue on the public agenda eroded faith in Erdogan's government even more. Numerous public opinion polls present a significant drop in the public support to Erdogan Administration for allowing a new refugee wave. In fact, one IPSOS poll<sup>19</sup> found that 75% of the Turkish population agrees that borders should be closed to refugees.

## **Unpreparedness in tackling the Natural Disasters**

Since the AKP first came to power in 2002, they have failed to adequately prepare for natural disasters in Turkey. The most recent, and one of the most devastating, resulted in the loss of considerable forestland in Turkey. The latest forest fires across Turkey in the summer of 2021 plainly demonstrated Erdogan Administration's inability to manage crisis circumstances. Turkey experienced one of the biggest forest fires in its history, which started in late July 2021. To put this in context, from 2008 and 2020, an average of 20,760 hectares of land burnt in Turkey every year; however, between January and August of 2021, only in eight months, this figure skyrocketed to 177,476 hectares.

Although several studies highlighted the fact that the possibility of forest fires has been increasing due to rising temperatures ex-ante, the complete absence of serviceable firefighting planes clearly demonstrated the Erdogan Administration's unpreparedness for such a disaster severely magnifying the scope of the forest fires and elicited a strong public reaction. Furthermore, the overall mishandling of the issue demonstrated how much the Erdogan Administration has fallen out of touch with society. Instead of corresponding resignations, as is customary in such situations, or guaranteeing state compensation for material losses, President Erdogan threw packets of Turkish tea from a moving bus during his visit<sup>20</sup>, and a local AKP official<sup>21</sup> promised that loan terms for rebuilding would be so generous that "others whose houses did not burn down might wish theirs had burned down too."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd0ef00MKj4>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en/world-refugee-day-2021>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFHkHlSS8zo>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6LVeGAek14>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/anger-in-turkey-grows-over-governments-handling-of-wildfires>



## Broken Bonds with Generation Z

President Erdogan hopes to win over 5 million young Turks, the so-called “Generation Z”, who will have attained voting age in 2023, accounting for roughly 12% of the entire electorate. Nevertheless, large number of the country's youth population is dissatisfied and publicly reject him. One of the most recent proofs of young disillusionment in Turkey was exposed during one of President Erdogan's live-stream events on YouTube. Throughout the event, viewers' critical comments, primarily made up of young people, poured in, notably with the “Novotesforyou” hashtag, leading to the shutdown of the YouTube comments area by President Erdogan’s media team.<sup>23</sup>

This is a generation that has only ever known Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Islamic-conservative AKP; nevertheless, studies demonstrate that Generation Z is more environmentally friendly, empathetic, sensitive and thoughtful" than previous generations.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, there is a mismatch between the AKP policies, which mostly prioritize the concerns of older/conservative voters, and the younger generation’s core values. According to several reliable polls, Turkey's Generation Z has little affinity for President Erdogan and his ideals. As shown in a study conducted in 2020 by the Gezici Arastrma Merkezi, 76.4 percent of respondents ranked the rule of law and democracy as top objectives for Turkey.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, MetroPoll’s study demonstrated that 55 percent of AKP voters prefer university rectors to be democratically elected instead of appointed by the president.<sup>26</sup> The combination of the economic slump and persistent youth unemployment, as well as the Erdogan Administration's inability to connect with Generation Z's core tenets, might have a significant impact on the AKP's potential defeat in the 2023 elections.

The perception, arguably the fact, that the aforementioned reasons derive from structural issues, as well as the administration’s insufficiency of presenting credible remedies for their solutions, pushed society to question Erdogan Administration’s competency thus, support for the AK Party has seriously weakened, particularly among the AKP's own voter base. Demonstration of the eroding AKP support can be seen from the various polls: for instance, Avrasya Araştırma’s June 2021 survey shows that AKP support has already plummeted to 25 percent excluding undecided voters, the lowest level since the establishment of the party, while it was approximately 42.6 percent in the 2018 election. More crucially, along with the AKP, President Erdogan's support is dwindling too. According to polls, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu and Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavas are running more than ten percentage points ahead of President Erdogan for the upcoming presidential election; İyi Party's Meral Aksener is also outperforming President Erdogan.

## Conclusion: EU Needs to Have a Master Plan to Engage More and Constructively with the Turkish Opposition, particularly for the Post-Erdogan Era

The EU-Turkey strategic and economic cooperation has a long history, but since the start of the refugee crisis, the EU has prioritized Turkey's role as a refugee guardian over its role as strategic

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/turkey-can-erdogan-social-media-generation-z-support.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/generation-z-turkey/a-54057490>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.indyturk.com/node/194281/haber/gezici-ara%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rma-t%C3%BCrkiye%E2%80%99nin-gelece%C4%9Fi-z-ku%C5%9Fa%C4%9F%C4%B1n%C4%B1n-elinde>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-erdogan-fears-turkeys-generation-z/a-56477232>

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partner that is tied to the EU via the accession process. The present opposition alliance in Turkey is unsatisfied with the EU's treatment of Turkey over many key matters including the refugee issue and believes it is disingenuous. Despite the EU's financial support, which is significantly insufficient from the opposition's point of view, the EU has disregarded numerous socioeconomic difficulties brought on by refugee flows to Turkey, whereas the EU and its member states have been extremely careful about similar social problems when it comes to potential refugee flows to the EU. Moreover, despite Erdogan Administration's flagrant breaches of democratic principles, the European Union's unwillingness to take decisive action(s) against the Erdogan Administration and the EU's indirect support to Erdogan Administration due to the cooperation on bilateral issues for almost all past elections has outraged both the political and social oppositions, which have been to a large extent pro-EU thus far.

To that end, the EU should redefine its relationship with Turkey by moving from a primarily economic and refugee-focused basis to one that prioritizes the democratic improvements in the country that the opposition has been very vocal about. Otherwise, the real danger would be that if the EU keeps its relations with Turkey more and more on transactional basis by throwing a blind eye to its commitments to the improvement of democratic values in Turkey, the EU's future engagements and cooperation with Turkey might not be as welcomed as Brussels expects due to the long-disregarded salient critiques and demands of the Turkish opposition that is ever closer to form the next government in Turkey.

## VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

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