

# Appeasement in the new age of dictators – a weekly news review

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If the European Union can describe Turkey as showing “positive tendencies”, what would a country have to do to merit EU censure? In the words of Human Rights Watch, “The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is dismantling human rights protections and democratic norms in Turkey on a scale unprecedented in the 18 years he has been in office.” The previous week had seen the Turkish government accelerate its attempts to eliminate the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest party in Turkey, and with it any remnants of Turkish democracy, and had ended with Erdoğan’s presidential decree withdrawing Turkey from the European Convention on

Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). Yet, on Thursday, before the summit of the EU Council, the EU's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, claimed that "in the last month we have seen positive developments on the part of Turkey". This was the same Mr Borrell who, just a week earlier, had put his name to a statement expressing the EU's deep concern about the Turkish government's attacks on the HDP, which, that statement noted, added to "the EU's concerns regarding the backsliding in fundamental rights in Turkey".

As expected, the EU Council, which is made up of heads of state from the different EU countries, agreed to continue working with Turkey on further developing the customs union and relaxing visa regulations. This came with a proviso on Turkey's behaviour, but only, it seems, with respect to a very narrowly conceived understanding of the interests of the EU and its member states. There was an obligatory reference to concern over "major setbacks for human rights", but the only concerns that count are tensions over gas drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, and keeping refugees out of Europe. Council President, Charles Michel, explained at the subsequent press conference that they would move onto more concrete proposals provided Turkey "maintain a moderate behaviour, a positive behaviour". Human rights concerns did not prevent them looking forward to further talks with Turkey on "counter terrorism" or from wanting to strengthen cooperation over the return of rejected asylum seekers.

The predecessor of the EU was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War as a way of avoiding future conflict, and the EU's fundamental principles are listed as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights. With respect to Turkey, the last month has seen dangerously negative developments in all those areas, though the risk of all-out war with Greece has receded.

Of course, we should not be surprised by the EU summit. National leaders have already demonstrated that they can't see beyond narrow business interests when it comes to allowing vital vaccines to be made by and for the whole world, or in order to stop changes that could make our planet uninhabitable. Now they have failed to respond to Turkey's destruction of

democracy, even though this is unleashing forces that threaten stability all around. The concerns that guide these politicians are the promotion of business and trade at any cost (including fossil fuel extraction and arms sales), the power politics of NATO, and stopping immigration. Their actions risk encouraging more military struggle and new threats to NATO countries – including from violent jihadists, inspired and empowered by Turkey – and the making of many more refugees.

Their hypocritical selfishness and short-sightedness is especially concerning because EU and other western states do have leverage that could make a difference. Support for President Erdoğan and the government run by his Justice and Development Party (AKP) is very susceptible to the pressures of economic downturn, and Turkey's economy has been showing some definite negative tendencies. Erdoğan's sacking, last Saturday, of the recently appointed head of the central bank is expected to make the economic situation worse – both as regards the high inflation that is crippling households across the country, and plummeting investor confidence. Trade deals between Turkey and the EU matter much more to the Turkish side. If European politicians wanted to make them contingent on real improvements to human rights and democracy, this would be a good time to negotiate.

Of course, not all European politicians are happy with what is happening. A group of MEPs wrote a public call to the participants of Thursday's EU summit to "finally end the appeasement policy towards the Erdoğan regime". They pointed out that "President Erdoğan and his coalition of ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious forces see the EU's willingness to make compromises on foreign policy as a carte blanche to crush the country's opposition." And they concluded, "If the upcoming EU summit does not live up to this historic responsibility, we fear great damage to democracy both in Turkey and in the region." But they are in the minority. The EU might have been established with the hope of ending future conflict, but 21st century leaders have refused to learn from the historical consequences of imperialism and autocracy. Memories of the appeasement of Hitler are sometimes recalled in order to justify ill-conceived military interventions, but it seems that they can't be allowed to interrupt business as usual.

EU policy reflects that of its constituent states. Germany has been particularly belligerent in its support for Turkey, but recently it has been France's turn to, as the French Communist Party put it, "normalise relations with RT Erdoğan on the back of the Kurds".

The failure of the French government to complete its investigation into the triple murder of Kurdish women leaders in Paris eight years ago, for which the Turkish secret service (MIT) is almost universally believed to be responsible, is not just an open wound, but a source of concern for the future. On 14 March, a French Sunday paper, Le Journal de Dimanche, published an article based on previously secret Belgian legal documents concerning an investigation into Turkish assassination plans against leading Kurds in Europe. The suspected coordinator of these plans has spent the last 4 ½ years as Turkish Ambassador to Paris. But, the day before the article was published, "Ismail Hakki Musa returned to his country, carrying in his suitcase the dark files concerning activity by the Turkish secret services on European territory... Protected by his diplomatic immunity, this former deputy director of MIT... appointed to Paris in 2016, was never bothered by the French authorities."

President Macron's relationship with Erdoğan has often been confrontational, but is also opportunistic. In an interview recorded on 2 March, shortly after a video conference with Erdoğan, and broadcast on Tuesday, he warned against Turkish interference in France's upcoming presidential election; but he also added, "Since the beginning of the year, I've noticed a desire on the part of President Erdoğan to re-engage in the relationship... I want to believe that this path is possible". And on Friday he tweeted his approval of the EU line, noting "we have observed positive advances on the part of Ankara".

The pro-Ankara message was underlined by the detention on "terrorism" charges (also on Tuesday) of twelve Kurdish activists – nine in Marseille, two in Draguignan, and one in Paris; and by the police questioning of Vedat Bingöl, former co-chair of the Democratic Kurdish Council of France, who was asked about an investigation against him in Turkey for "insulting Erdoğan". This is not a crime in France. The detentions took place at the same time as the

Turkish Foreign minister was meeting with the French Defence Minister in Brussels. These police actions have been condemned by the French Communist Party, and by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise, who raised the issue in parliament, but other parties have remained silent.

French reactions to Turkey are entangled with responses to political Islam, which has generated confusion on all sides of the political spectrum. The official line from the Élysée Palace pushes for all Muslim institutions to sign up to the values of the secular republic, which call for a strict separation between religion and politics. Logically, this is not strictly possible, as for a religious person their beliefs can guide their every action, so there are legitimate reasons for objecting to this approach. It is also politically naive on the part of French politicians to attempt to change religious beliefs through legislation. These particular policies are targeted explicitly at Muslim communities and so contribute to an indiscriminate Islamophobia. When anti-racists point this out, they are accused of “Islamophobia”, the catch-all term used by the increasingly right-wing establishment to lump together and denigrate all their perceived enemies. However, there are political movements that manipulate Islamic belief towards destructive ends, and that can and should face legal restrictions. Turkey’s pushing of an intolerant and divisive form of Islam that encourages religious and ethnic prejudice in the pursuit of greater Turkish power and influence is a case in point, and their promotion of these ideas has become a growing worry everywhere that Turkish immigrants have settled.

The dangerous absurdity of these French politics is demonstrated by the current stooshie over the grand mosque that is under construction in Strasbourg. This is a project by Milli Gorus Islamic Confederation, a Turkish Islamist organisation founded by Erdoğan’s former mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, which increasingly functions as a branch of the Turkish AKP government. The mosque is a worrying prospect for anyone concerned about the future of Turks and Kurds living in the city and doesn’t auger well for those from either community who want to practise a public politics that is critical of Turkey. But what brought it into the news this week was the announcement that the municipality, headed by a Green Party mayor, has agreed to give 2.5 million Euros of public money towards the mosque’s construction. (Public

funding for a mosque would not be possible in other parts of France, however Alsace has different rules.) This announcement brought the inevitable accusations of “Islamophobia”, protests from the Interior Minister about “foreign interference on French soil”, and discussions about the need for the mosque to commit to secular republican values. Instead of focussing on the real and specific political dangers of a major organisational hub for Turkey’s ethno-religious aggressive nationalism, reaction has tended to degenerate into a general anti-Muslim xenophobia. No thought in all this is given to secular Kurds, who are the most resolute opponents of destructive Turkish Islamic politics, but who continue to be regarded as impediments to better French-Turkish relations.

Strasbourg got a reminder of the fragility of French liberté last Saturday, when the march for Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan was prevented, by a row of police vans, from reaching the steps of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture. Kurds had been deprived of the right to demonstrate in front of the European institution for protecting human rights. They didn’t force the issue – the building was empty in any case – but the message was clear. The demonstration, along with others across the globe, was a response to rumours that Öcalan had died in his Turkish prison. On Thursday, his brother was finally allowed to speak with him on the telephone, but they were cut off even before he could ascertain Öcalan’s state of health. This abbreviated call is very far from meeting demands that Öcalan and the other three prisoners on the island of Imrali be given their legal rights to regular communication with their lawyers and with their families.

Turkey still likes to keep up the pretence of a justice system, but every limited win, however small, is the result of huge pressure. This was demonstrated again in the Hrant Dink murder trial, which came to a conclusion on Friday, fourteen years after the widely revered Armenian journalist, editor, and rights campaigner was gunned down outside his newspaper’s offices in Istanbul. The court convicted 26 people, of whom two former police chiefs and two ex-security officers received life sentences, but, in the words of Erol Önderoğlu, Turkey representative for Reporters Without Borders, “Some of those responsible for this assassination, including the sponsors, have still not been

prosecuted... This partial justice rendered after 14 years leaves a bitter taste and should not mark the end of the search for the truth.”

While the well-healed defenders of European values were getting ready to appease Erdoğan in Brussels, the real guardians of humanity were out on the streets in their millions. European politicians failed to stand up for the HDP, but Sunday’s huge Newroz celebrations in the Kurdish cities of South East Turkey and in Istanbul were a massive show of support for the party and all that they stand for – for democracy, freedom, equality, women’s rights, and peace. They demonstrated that, however much the government might attack individuals and close down party structures, they could not stop the momentum of a movement that has won the hearts and fired the hopes of masses of people.

The oppression goes on. There were detentions at the Newroz celebrations; HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, is under investigation for his speech; Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu was dragged out in his pyjamas from the sit-in in the parliament building where he was protesting being removed from his role as MP; and former HDP co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, who is already in custody waiting charges that could result in a 142-year sentence, was sentenced to 3 ½ years in prison for “insulting the president” in a tweet from 2015. But the will to resist is unstoppable. There are practical procedural things happening: a legal challenge has been launched against Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, on the grounds that this requires approval of parliament and not simply a presidential decree; and discussions are taking place in the HDP about organisational manoeuvres if the court approves the party ban; but none of this would be possible without mass support.

It is no coincidence that we have also seen major demonstrations against growing authoritarianism in the UK, and recently in France. The failure of international political leaders to stand up for democracy in Turkey reflects the failures of democracy in their own countries. We are in the midst of a profound and extensive crisis of democracy, and we have a generation of leaders who are more than ever out of touch and at odds with the majority of the people they represent. Every authoritarian act in one country makes it easier for something worse to be carried out elsewhere; but, at the same time,

every act of resistance can give strength to those resisting their own government's oppression.