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**THE CLOCK IS TICKING FOR TURKISH SECULARIZATION  
AND EU MEMBERSHIP**

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Turkey is heading towards a controversial referendum on constitutional changes that will concentrate powers in the office of Presidency. **If passed, the reform would lead to an authoritarian shift in the country that would sweep away the Kemalist Revolution and strain the relationships with the EU and NATO in a heartbeat.**

On Sunday, April 16 2017, Turkish citizens will vote on the highly debated constitutional referendum sponsored by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and of Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım with the support of the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) chaired by Devlet Bahçeli. The voters will decide on a set of eighteen amendments to the Constitution of Turkey, aiming to transform the current parliamentary system into a presidential system.

The proposal for constitutional reform has been on the table of negotiations from 2011, and became a core point of AKP electoral programme in the 2015 general elections in June and November. In October 2015, the majority impasse in the Parliament was overcome as the MHP, traditionally hostile to an executive presidency, decided to cooperate in drafting and passing the reform. In May 2016, current prime minister Yıldırım succeeded to his predecessor Ahmet Davutoğlu, who allegedly resigned due to clashing views with the President on the change of the form of government. In a vote held in January 2017, the Parliament consented to submit the reform of the constitution to the popular vote.

The reform has raised concerns in the Turkish civil society and in the European Union because **the envisaged measures would lead to a concentration of powers in the hands of the Presidential figure. Since the President would be elected by a popular vote and since the office of the Prime Minister would be eliminated in favour of the creation of two or three vice-Presidencies, the president would *de facto* become the head of the state and of the government.** Furthermore, the Presidential office would gain the command of the armed forces and of the national security services, the right to settle budgets, to appoint and dismiss ministers and judges of the Supreme Court and to issue decrees in some legislative areas. Last but not least, whereas today the President is obliged to take a

neutral stance, in case of a “Yes” victory the Presidency would be allowed to have a clear-cut political affiliation.

**It is an open secret that President Erdoğan has been willing to secure his grip on power for a very long time.** However, **the urgency of the referendum is influenced by the severe plummeting of social and economic standards in the country.** The rising unemployment rate, the high inflation and external debt and the recent downgrading of Turkey’s international rating are leading to an economic crisis and are eroding the President’s popular support basis. Therefore, it is vitally important for the current leadership of the country to broaden its mandate in order to avoid ousting in case the economic crisis leads to unrest and rebellion.

Nevertheless, Turkish civil society would have to pay a high price to let President Erdoğan hold power until potentially 2029 on the levels of national concern and of the country’s international relations.

From the internal point of view, **the constitutional reform promoted by the AKP and the MHP would indeed dismantle the secularization of the country implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the beginning of last century to create an authoritarian state of Islamist orientation.** But since the Kemalist Revolution is still cherished by the Turkish citizens and since Atatürk is still considered the father of the modern Turkish country, any attempt of interfering with this system seriously undermines the national stability and might trigger popular revolt. This is confirmed by the high mobilization of the opposition forces supporting the “No”, which gather around the slogan “For Our Future”, and by the electoral polls showing that the two opposite outcomes are neck and neck only one week ahead of the vote – circumstance that raises the spectrum of electoral frauds.

The liberal and pro-democracy strata of the society are struggling to win this battle as the current leadership is implementing an overwhelming propaganda operation of stigmatisation of the “No” supported by conducting an attentive stick and carrot policy. Although President Erdoğan has conceded an appearance in a rally supporting the “No”, **the government and the AKP officials are indeed hammering a demonization campaign against any opposition by linking them to terrorist groups such as ISIS, the PKK and and the Gülenists,** i.e. the followers of the cleric exiled in the US who stands accused of staging the July putsch. Voices of intestine dissent are equally silenced: the provincial AKP deputy Ozan Erdem was forced to resign after he declared that the country would face civil war if the constitutional changes were defeated in the vote.

From the external point of view, instead, the referendum is worsening the relationship with the EU with some of its member countries. As a “yes” victory would entail the shift of the “civilizational vector” of the society, the consequent loss of rights and freedoms would strike a fatal blow to Turkish EU membership, already lying in a state of permanent freezing. This would entail drastic consequences for the pro-European strata of the Turkish society, which tend to be the most educated and economically active, and which do not wish a departure from the EU and its values.

The European Union has taken stance on the side of democracy against holding the vote in the current state of emergency, lasting from last July's *coup d'état*, and warned Turkey against the disruptive potential of the referendum outcome.

In the [statement by the High Representative Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn, the EU argued indeed that](#) “the proposed Constitutional amendments raise serious concerns at the excessive concentration of powers in one office, with serious effect on the necessary checks and balances and on the independence of the judiciary. It is also of concern that this process of constitutional change is taking place under the state of emergency”. Moreover, the representatives of the EU Commission declared that “the proposed amendments, if approved at the referendum of 16 April, and especially their practical implementation, will be assessed in light of Turkey's obligations as an EU candidate country and as a member of the Council of Europe”.

In addition to that, **the Turkish government has triggered clashes and diplomatic crises with several EU countries, notably Netherlands few days ahead of the elections and Germany, by qualifying them as “Nazis” because they would not allow Turkish ministers to campaign for the “Yes” among Turkish communities living within their borders.** If the constitutional reform will be approved this Sunday, it is likely that relations will become even further strained.

The frail veneer of democracy of the Turkish leadership, contradicted by the authoritarian positions and the massive propaganda campaign in favor of passing the referendum, proves that the EU should not accept a positive outcome of the referendum as to do so would entail an implicit acceptance of the authoritarian shift in the country and of the repression of dissidents in the Turkish society. These consequences would contradict the values of democracy promoted not only by the EU, but also by NATO. Therefore, although cooperation with Turkey is useful with regard to the regulation of the refugees' flow to Europe and to military cooperation, in case of approval of the constitutional changes both EU and NATO should reassess the need for allied relations with a country which is more and more revolving around an authoritarian leader.

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