

Anti-Western sentiments in Turkey's politics

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Anti-Western narratives have intensified in Turkey's domestic discourse and foreign policy in recent months. They were manifested, for example, during the negotiations concerning the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden; the deadlocked relations with the US; or the strained relations between Turkey and Greece. There have been repeated accusations that Turkey's security interests are being disregarded (particularly in the case of Kurdish issues and border disputes with Greece) and that the US is upholding sanctions and restrictions against Turkey. Great emphasis is usually placed on the idea that the West is anti-Turkish and Islamophobic. The burning of the Turkish president in effigy and of the Koran by demonstrators in Stockholm are used as examples of this. Anti-Western rhetoric has temporarily weakened due to the deadly earthquake, which struck the country on 6 February this year. Nevertheless, it still remains widespread in Turkey's domestic politics, especially in the context of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections (planned for 14 May). Currently, anti-Western undertones are being actively pursued by the ruling camp, although they also echo within the majority of the population and remain deeply embedded in the political culture of the Republic.

The West as a problem for the AKP

Turkey's national interests in foreign policy is a topic that is constantly present in the country's public debate and is subject to heated arguments. The West, primarily the USA but also the EU, is the common point of reference in both positive and negative terms, for the entire political class and the Turkish public. The government finds it more important and politically convenient to emphasise issues over which Turkey disagrees with Western countries and the problems for which the latter are responsible. The common denominator is the belief that Turkey is not treated as an equal partner and that it is not given its due credit while having its interests disregarded. Such arguments makes it easier for the government to highlight the reason for its international assertiveness and the state's position, mobilise its own electorate and appeal to the rest of society.

The allegation that has recently resonated most strongly with the Turkish public is that the West both supports and tolerates groups, which Turkey considers to be terrorist. This issue has been frequently raised in the Turkish political debate over the past few months. Western countries have been strongly criticised for the support which they have allegedly provided, for example, to Kurdish circles linked to the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party PYD/YPG, as well as to the Gülen movement, which is considered to be a terrorist organisation in Turkey. The negotiations on Turkey's ratification of Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership – which began last May – have been used as an opportunity to publicise these cases. The

Turkish government has made the ratification of these states conditional on the fulfilment of some of its demands. For example, it insists that these countries, especially Sweden, should amend their criminal codes regarding combating terrorism on their territories and to consider Turkish requests for the deportation of suspected terrorists.

Western countries are frequently accused of actively marginalising Turkey's international position. The public debate in Turkey is focused on such issues like, the US Congress blocking the sale of F-16 aircrafts to Ankara and the continuation of the sanctions regime which were imposed after Turkey purchased the S-400 defence system from Russia. The Turkish government also claims that its interests are jeopardised as the West is actively arming Turkey's regional opponents, i.e. Greece and the Syrian Kurds. These topics have recurred frequently during bilateral meetings with the United States (e.g. at the level of foreign ministers or as part of the 'strategic mechanism'). Ankara has made it clear every time that it disagrees with Washington's policy.

Turkey shares NATO's stance on the Ukraine war. Regardless of this, the US has been accused in the Turkish political and media debate of instrumentalising this conflict in order to strengthen American dominance in global politics. For example, the chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – AKP's coalition partner – has blamed the US for inciting regime change in Russia and for using the war in Ukraine to compete with Russia while advancing its own global interests with the help of NATO.

Both the elite and the public react robustly to any circumstantial evidence that allegedly proves the existence of anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic sentiment in the West. The Stockholm demonstrations in January this year, during which the Koran was burned and the Turkish president was hanged in effigy twice, have stoked this discourse inside Turkey. They provoked numerous protests in Ankara and Istanbul, which nine Western countries (including the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden) used as an excuse for the temporary closure of their consulates and embassies in Turkey. The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs unequivocally recognised this move as a deliberate attempt to tarnish the country's reputation and as an indirect attack on its stability and economic credibility.

Interests and resentments

The anti-Western and anti-American tones in the political discourse of the incumbent Turkish government are not new. The overriding goal of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's policy is to rebuild Turkey's splendour as a civilisational and major political player on the global scale. The cornerstone of this agenda is equal treatment in relations with the West. To achieve this, Turkey was making efforts to join the EU and, since the accession process proved unsuccessful, it has assumed an assertive stance in contacts with Brussels. It has also been making attempts to strengthen its position within NATO and to pursue an active and autonomous policy, for example in the Middle East. The Western accusations concerning Erdoğan's authoritarian rule, the brutality of the authorities during the pacification of protests in 2013 and repressions after the failed coup in 2016 are met with harsh criticism in Turkey. Ankara has also consistently opposed any Western attempts to restrict its assertiveness in foreign policy. Such moves are perceived in Turkey as de facto hostile. Even though Turkey has strong institutional, political and economic ties with the West, the AKP constantly resorts to anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric as an instrument for social mobilisation.

The government's policy is just one of the factors that trigger anti-Western sentiments in public discourse. This resentment is inherent in the strong emotions and beliefs that have structured the political scene since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Turkey's founding myth, i.e. the War of Independence in 1919–1922 and the establishment of the Republic in 1923, stems from the victory of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's troops over the Allies, which prevented the division of Turkey (the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920). According to the Kemalist tradition, modernisation based on the Western model is strongly linked to Turkish nationalism and is at the same time accompanied by a far-reaching distrust of the West. This tradition is an important point of reference for almost all opposition parties (CHP and İYİ) and also the AKP's coalition partner, MHP. Hostility towards Western countries (especially the USA) is also strongly rooted among the extra-parliamentary left-wing parties and in Islamist circles, to which the AKP belongs. This has been reflected for decades in public opinion polls: 67% of Turkey's citizens believe that the US is playing a negative role in the international arena, and only 23% believe it is positive (data from the German Marshall Fund survey – Transatlantic Trends 2022).

The forecast

The anti-Western narrative has been temporarily toned down due to the earthquake. However, it remains a source of catchy and appealing slogans, especially for the ruling camp. Therefore, it will soon be back on the political agenda when the campaign intensifies. It is unlikely that any breakthrough will happen in the pre-election period, such as making the ratification of the Nordic countries' membership conditional on the US unblocking the sale of F-16s and modernisation programme. Inevitable controversies linked to the election campaign may fuel criticism from the West and provoke Turkish countermeasures.

Consequently, the strained relations between Turkey and the West should be treated as a systemic and long-term problem. The differences in the interests and points of view of both sides are large and independent of the divisions on the Turkish political scene. The resolution of disputes will further be hindered by international dynamics and Turkey's domestic situation. Nevertheless, Ankara will not risk breaking off relations with the West, which it cannot simply replace with any country or group of states.