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## NEW SCENARIO FOR TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION AFTER THE REFERENDUM

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For Turkey, 12 September is a day loaded with symbolic content. Thirty years ago, this date saw the declaration of a military coup that ushered in one of the harshest periods of repression in the country's recent history. It is no accident that Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government should have chosen this day to hold the referendum on a raft of constitutional reforms that, among other aims, are to curtail the power and immunity of members of the armed forces and underpin their subordination to civilian rule. Neither is it any accident that the process of bringing charges against senior members of the Military Junta was already underway the day after the referendum.

The amendments were approved by 58% of the voters in a day notable for its high levels of participation in the country as a whole, but still higher levels of abstention in the south-eastern regions where Kurdish voters had been urged to boycott the ballot. The feeling of tension was countrywide and Turkish citizens voted in an atmosphere marked by polarisation. While the government insistently labelled anti-reformists as coup-minded, the opposition emphasised the risk that justice would be made subservient to the interests of the executive.

The fear factor played a prominent part in this campaign, especially among groups opposing the constitutional reforms. First, along with fear of the omnipresence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in both public and private domains, there was fear of a process of Islamisation, fear that things were taking a presidentialist turn in which the ground was being prepared for the moment in which Prime Minister Erdogan would be presenting his candidature for the job of head of state and, in particular, fear that the independence of the judiciary would be undermined and the system of separation and balance of powers weakened.

What does all this have to do with the European Union? Representatives of the European Parliament and the European Commission supported the constitutional reforms as a step in the right direction. The opposition leaders, starting with the Chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kiliçdağroglu, reacted by criticising European support for the amendments, going so far as to accuse the government of currying favour with European officials by regaling them with valuable gifts and limousine rides when they visited Tur-

key. To all this must be added a letter sent to European institutions by such eminent Turkish intellectuals as Binnaz Topraz and Sevket Pamuk – brother of the Nobel laureate in Literature – explaining that they recognised the need for a new constitution but criticised the way in which the reforms were being introduced, along with the fact that critics were being stigmatised as upholders of the *status quo*. They also stated that the Turkish government was presenting the EU as if it were giving unconditional support to the matter.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the plebiscite, the EU foreign affairs ministers discussed how to improve communication and coordination with Turkey. No agreement or plan of action was formalised although it was made clear that, whatever the pace at which Turkey's process of accession to the EU is advancing, the EU is keen to set up strategic talks with Ankara on issues like Iran, the Middle East and energy policy. In the words of Alexander Stubb, the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Turkey is now one of the world's top five countries and ahead of any European country taken individually. The holding of regular strategic talks is a project that appeals to both sides but also one Turkey might be wary of if anyone should posit this as an alternative to joining the EU.

In any case, recognition of Turkey's strategic role by European diplomats and the constitutional revamping have brought Turkey a little closer to Europe. Bringing the armed forces under civilian control has been a significant move and in the direction that Brussels has always sought. Nevertheless, for all their importance, the reforms will not overcome huge resistance in some capitals like Paris or Berlin, even while it may have bolstered the arguments of advocates of better treatment for the Turkish candidature.

There is still a long row to hoe in a terrain full of obstacles. Worse, it could be a minefield. In the domestic sphere, the Turkish government must endeavour to forge wider-ranging consensus with regard to the drafting of a new constitution, must be more attuned to matters of concern for the Kurdish population and, above all, it must be especially scrupulous with its nominations of judges in order to demonstrate that it is not seeking to subject judicial power to the interests of any one party, ideological line or social group.

The EU will need to accompany the process of Turkey's reforms with greater incentives and, in particular, with a more constructive attitude with regard to the accession negotiations. In its foreign policy, the EU must demonstrate that it counts on and listens to Turkey and that it takes Turkey's interests into consideration. As a recent International Crisis Group report has noted, regarding the Turkish position *vis-à-vis* Israel and Iran, Ankara perhaps overrates its own capacities and significance but its western partners should also give due recognition to its specific weight on the regional scale and beyond. There are many ways of going about this. One of them is getting strategic discussions underway and there are signs that this may be happening this month of September. Another might be closer incorporation of Turkey into the mechanisms of the new European foreign policy. Yet this process cannot be disengaged from normalisation of the accession negotiations. Otherwise, the spectre of discriminatory treatment will resurge along with consolation prizes.

In short, after a very intense summer, the Turkish government would do well to combine prudence, persistence and generosity in managing both its foreign and domestic agendas, while Europe will have to respond with serenity, imagination and strategic thinking to a Turkey that is approaching its gates with heightened self-esteem and ambition.