

Erdogan and Europe: the long disengagement?

Blog post by Associate Adviser Thomas Gratowski, 21 March 2017

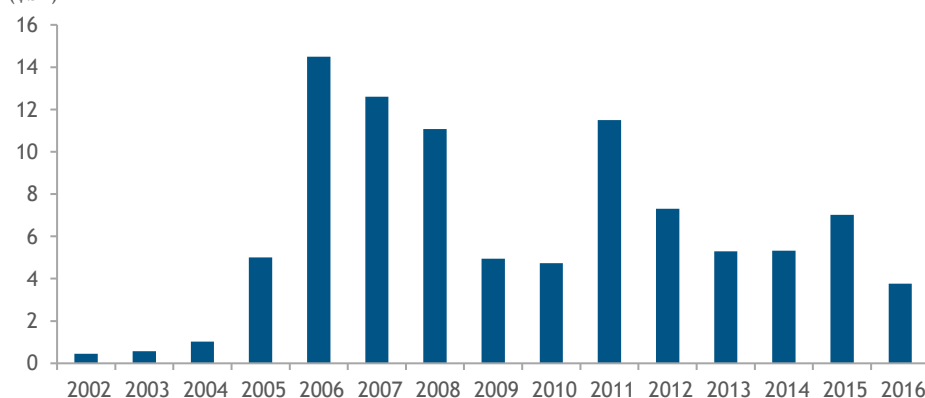
The Dutch election has set a precedent: It pays for ‘mainstream’ European politicians to take a tough line on Turkey, which has become the symbol for the challenges of immigration in many EU member states. Mark Rutte’s stand-off with Ankara was certainly a vote winner. This has not gone unnoticed by party strategists in Paris and Berlin, who are preparing for their own landmark elections this year. Turkey is also heading towards its own vote in a few weeks, making domestic politics an important part of current disputes between the Turkish government and its counterparts in Europe. Once the dust settles later this year, will both sides return to more cooperative relations?

Probably not. Erdogan is increasingly pursuing a foreign policy that is as independent as possible of the EU. This explains his u-turn and rapprochement with Moscow, and his attempts to improve ties with Tehran. By distancing himself from Europe, Erdogan is also stirring the nationalist sentiment that Turkey has no real friends: Europe - a bastion of Nazism and anti-Muslim sentiment - wants to weaken Turkey just as any other geopolitical rival does and it needs a strong president to push back. Such a narrative might help win the 16 April referendum, but as this becomes a legitimising argument for constitutional changes, executive President Erdogan will be pushed to pick fights with Europe on a regular basis.

This will add to the estrangement between the two. Suspicion about Erdogan’s authoritarian intentions will also not go away. If approved, the new constitution would allow him to stay in power until 2029 - or even 2034 if he has parliament on his side. He would also wield more power over all three branches of government and could rule by decree. Will he exercise restraint in dealing with domestic opponents? This seems unlikely. Close EU cooperation with Ankara seems unlikely under such conditions.

EU FDI inflows to Turkey

(\$bn)



While it is hard to disentangle the effect of EU-Turkish rifts from the precarious security situation within Turkey, they clearly have economic costs. FDI from the EU dropped in 2016 to its lowest since 2005. European tourists are staying away from the beaches of the Aegean. The fact that Ankara has nonetheless escalated tensions tells us about the level of economic pain Erdogan's government is willing to accept in exchange for political advantage. For its part, the EU will have its own threshold for extending advantage to a Turkey drifting away from the EU's preferred course. While no one believes that Turkey will join the EU anytime soon - or ever - even the alternative model, an upgraded customs union that expands free trade to agriculture, services and procurement, could face more political than technocratic hurdles. The recent free trade deal with Canada has set the example that European national - and regional - parliaments have a say in comprehensive agreements. Wallonia almost stopped its ratification as a result. And Erdogan's Turkey is not Canada.