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**TURKEY'S SECULARISM AFTER THE 2016 FAILED MILITARY  
COUP AND THE STATE'S DEGÜLENIZATION**

***Secularismul Turciei după tentativa de lovitură de stat din 2016  
și procesul de de-gülenizare a statului***

**Abstract:** *This article aims to establish how the political events of 2016 in Turkey have shown that the real threat is not outside the country, but within itself. The effects of Turkey's coup attempt are felt beyond the political scene in Ankara. Erdoğan's regime is becoming more and more autocratic, and tens of thousands of its opponents have ended in prisons under the accusation of being "gülenists". Beyond that, Turkey seems to be at a crossroad, and the path that seems tempting to take is to move further away from the European Union and its traditional Western allies. The attempted coup from the night of July 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 shocked international public opinion, surprised the government of Ankara and was like a stab for the Turkish people. What led to the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey? What are its consequences? What lesson did the government, but also the Turkish people, learn? What has changed in Turkey since that event?*

**Keywords:** *AKP, coup, Erdoğan, gülenists, purge*

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Turkey has been in the attention of international press on all continents for many years now. Firstly, due to its geographical position, Turkey, the country on two continents, the Ottoman Empire's legacy, represents a bridge between the Mediterranean Sea in the South and the Black Sea in the North. Its geostrategic position dictates the spheres of influence of which it belongs to.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, as an international actor, Turkey is in an eternal space dilemma: where is it better or where does it have more devoted friends – in the East or the West? Since Turkey is surrounded by conflicts at a regional level (Iraq and Syria in the South, Caucasus and its frozen conflicts in the

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<sup>1</sup>Weiker 1981: 9.

North, the Balkan conflicts in the Northwest)<sup>2</sup>, its role in the region is more active, with the tendency of becoming a state with absolute decisional power. Although the “zero problems with the neighbours”<sup>3</sup> and “the establishment of balance between freedom and security”<sup>4</sup> policies have been launched externally, the outbreak of the war in Syria and Turkey’s categorical position against Bashar Al-Assad’s regime along with the worsening of its relations with Iran have transformed these national doctrines into vague memories. Yet, despite its modest energy resources, Turkey has a substantial geopolitical importance, which allows it to be an energy corridor that unites the East with the West.

The effects of Turkey’s failed coup are still felt today. On the evening of July 15<sup>th</sup> 2016, the Turkish army attempted a coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regime. The streets and airspaces of Ankara and Istanbul as well as public institutions were hauled by soldiers, tanks, aircraft, gunfire and civilians.<sup>5</sup> A part of Turkey’s army tried to overthrow president Erdoğan from the government, with the intention of establishing a constitutional order in the country and preserving the secularist ideas on which the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923. The Bosphorus Bridge and the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge linking Istanbul’s Asian and European parts were blocked by the army, the activity of the two Istanbul airports was stopped, and gunfire and explosions could be heard in both Istanbul and Ankara. The TRT public television station was besieged and occupied by the same army and a state of general chaos quickly encompassed Turkey. The Chief of the General Staff was taken hostage, as were the public television reporters who were detained by the military. The army announced the takeover of power and the imposition of the martial law, while promising a new Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

All this time, the information about President Erdoğan was uncertain. The possibility of him being on vacation in Bodrum was taken into account, but then he also announced that he would come out for statements. Finally, Erdoğan intervened live at CNN Türk through *Facetime*, because all other networks were blocked. The President urged the Turks to go out into the streets to defend democracy, assuring them he was still the head of state. Erdoğan was on a plane that was not allowed to land in Istanbul, so he was trying to get asylum in Germany. It was only during late that night that he landed in Istanbul where he was met by a large number of supporters, but the hostility was far from over in Ankara. People went out into the streets. Almost 300 of them died, while over 1,400 were

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<sup>2</sup>Insel 2017: 12

<sup>3</sup>Davutoğlu 2001: 54.

<sup>4</sup>Davutoğlu 2001: 54.

<sup>5</sup>Safety Global: <https://www.safeyglobal.com/case-study-failed-coup-detat-in-turkey> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>6</sup>Middle East Institute: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/unpacking-turkey-s-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

injured. The President promised them that the guilty ones would pay, and that even the death penalty would be taken into consideration.<sup>7</sup> Erdoğan quickly accused the low-ranking military officers who rebelled against their superiors. Later, he pointed his finger across the Atlantic to Pennsylvania, home of his great rival, Fethullah Gülen, a 76-year-old Imam who went into self-imposed exile when he moved from Turkey to the United States in 1999 to follow a medical treatment, and later settled in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. The exile was generated by policy grudges promoted by the country's leadership during that period.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the capture of the putschists by the Turkish army, President Erdoğan accused Gülen of being behind the coup. Former friends and allies, now virulent opponents, the hatred between Erdoğan and Gülen had broken out four years before, following Turkey's biggest corruption scandal involving several people close to the president, including his son Bilal. The media outlets owned by Gülen accused Erdoğan of corruption. In return, Erdoğan accused Gülen of “setting up a parallel state meant to overthrow him from power.”<sup>9</sup> From there on, rounds of mutual accusations of the former allies began and Gülen was declared the “First Public Enemy”<sup>10</sup> of Erdoğan's regime. The closing of a series of Dershanes<sup>11</sup> courses in Turkey, a project for which enormous amounts of money have been spent, has increased the tensions between the Islamic-conservative Turkish president and the self-exiled cleric. Following the coup attempt, Turkey has demanded Gülen's extradition by the United States<sup>12</sup>, but this has not yet happened, the USA claiming that there is no evidence that the former imam was involved in organizing the failed coup.

Gülen leads a world social movement known as the “Gülen Movement” (Hizmet) which currently includes several million followers, with a network of more than 800 schools around the world and projects focused on civil society and non-profit organizations. He is a promoter of inter-confessional dialogue and religious tolerance. Despite the values on which his teachings are based, he was accused by Turkish secularists of wanting to establish *sharia* laws. Moreover, he is seen as “the man of the

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<sup>7</sup>Middle East Institute: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/unpacking-turkey-s-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>8</sup>Al-Monitor: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/turkey-fethullah-gulen-cleric-opposition-erdogan-akp.html> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>9</sup>Al-Monitor: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/turkey-coup-anniversary-gulen-speaks.html> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>10</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup>Extra-curricular courses.

<sup>12</sup>“I appeal to the United States and President Barack Obama. Dear Mr. President, I have told you this before. Either you arrest hi, or send Fethullah Gulen back to Turkey. You did not listen. So I'm telling you again, after this attempted coup. Extradite this man from Pennsylvania to Turkey! If we are strategic partners or model partners, do what is necessary!” CNN: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/17/politics/erdogan-extradition-fethullah-gulen-turkish-coup/index.html> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

United States of America” by a broad circle in Turkey, or called “Agent Gülen.”<sup>13</sup> Gülen’s organization, which derives from Sunni Islam and has been officially designated as a terrorist organization, was suspected of being behind the attempted coup. Fethullah Gülen categorically denied having played any part in the coup, condemning it “in the strongest terms.”<sup>14</sup>

This was not the first coup or attempted coup in the history of modern Turkey. The country has a rich past of such events, with hundreds of thousands of executed people, and many Turks have lived such moments in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1993 and 1997 with the so-called “postmodern coup d’état”<sup>15</sup> (Darbe post-modern). The Turkish armed forces have always been considered a protector of democracy and laity, a defender of secular values imposed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk - the founder of the Republic of Turkey. The failed junction in July raised several questions in the Turkish society, but especially in the western world. Some theories have portrayed Erdoğan as the organizer of his own coup, thus seeking to increase his authority. According to other theories, the Turkish authorities knew about the putschists’ plans and let them act, in order to be able to breach them more easily and have a “victim president” who would have more arguments in favour of the establishment of a presidential regime in Turkey (that will accentuate and increase the powers of the head of state).<sup>16</sup>

For a country that experienced that many coups and coup attempts, many would say that this one was negligent and disorganized. First of all, Erdoğan did not give in to the military, as most administrations did. In fact, when the army rejected his election as president, Erdoğan ordered a referendum and won. Secondly, while the military managed to take over the state television, the other news channels were still transmitting. Erdoğan’s counterpart was *Facetime*, through which he urged his supporters to flood the streets of Turkey, thus cancelling the declaration of martial law and siege. Even after the attempt was over, officials in Turkey were still calling on people to stay on the streets and markets as a measure of protection against any other attacks. The president’s proposal was a success because he gathered large crowds of supporters who went on the streets all over the country and, in some cases, even faced the soldiers. Another sign of how little public support the plotters had is that even Erdoğan’s fiercest critics condemned the attempt, including all three main opposition parties.

When it comes to Erdoğan’s popularity, his most affectionate supporters say they are willing to give their lives for him. People have listened to the President, put the country’s future before themselves and went to empty-handedly fight the putschists. 241 of them lost their lives,

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<sup>13</sup>Al-Monitor: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/turkey-fethullah-gulen-cleric-opposition-erdogan-akp.html> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>14</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup>Mango 2005: 48.

<sup>16</sup>Middle East Institute: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/unpacking-turkey-s-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

and 2,797 were injured.<sup>17</sup> The photographs of the deceased are still displayed in all metro and bus stations in the busiest locations in Istanbul. The descriptions of these photos mention the names, occupation, and how these people died. In Turkey they are called “martyrs” - a term that raised many contradictions in society. These photographs with a special symbolism send a strong message to both Turkish citizens and those who visit this country. While opposition leaders and parties tend to limit themselves at a regional level, Erdoğan has supporters in both main cities and small towns, as well as in rural areas in Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

Despite all these theories and scenarios, the coup of July 15<sup>th</sup> led to a social coagulation of the Turks - people of different ethnicity, religion, political preferences stood together in front of a common adversary, marching around for days and chanting nationalist slogans. Istanbul was studded with the slogan “*Biz milletiz Türkiye’yi darbeye teröre yedirmeyiz*” (We are the nation. We will not let terror and hysteria take over Turkey)<sup>19</sup>. Detainings and mass arrests, dismissals, death threats, intimidation, all were the components of a horror plot that swept across Turkey. Turkey is now under more uncertainty. With Erdoğan emerging victoriously from the biggest challenge a Turkish politician can face, he is in an even better position to strengthen his power.

In a democracy, parties are in fact competitive traders, and in theory ready to honour the demands of the electorate. The traders` power to adapt according to time, trends, and demands separates them as potential and profit.<sup>20</sup> In general, any party tries to cover as much as possible from the electorate, but in reality all of them are drawing limits based on the relationship between what they supply and how big the demand is. Finally, any party addresses its electorate, and it cannot be united with others, although they can intersect in limited situations. Far from theory, most politicians know their voters, address them, but they will always push for a wider audience. Among these, there is still a charming, chaotic opportunism of those units that know how to impersonate the skeleton of society, favouring this game in order to facilitate hegemony. In this sense, the theory of the “Centre-Periphery” relationship of Şerif Mardin, a political scientist and Turkish sociologist, lends itself to the Turkish society, but is contrasted by AKP’s striking of becoming hegemonic. Although the “Centre-Periphery” is a framework of analysis, a methodology, it will be strongly exempt from certain developments in the modern, quasi-dynamic history of Modern Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup>Insel 2017: 83.

<sup>19</sup>Middle East Institute: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/unpacking-turkey-s-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>20</sup>Altunisik & Tür 2004: 65.

<sup>21</sup>Mardin 1973: <https://ondercetin.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/center-periphery-relations.pdf> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

Erdoğan was always open about his ambitions, but there were always obstacles and challenges.<sup>22</sup> Now, with all the dismissals, there is concern that it is still not surely known if the Turkish president is only targeting the actual authors of the coup, or if he will turn this opportunity into a hunt against anyone who will stand against his regime. Erdoğan is also taking into account the reinstatement of the death penalty, with the risk of shattering any chance of entering the EU. So far, 76,597 people suspected of being followers or sympathizers of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen were fired, 18,756 people arrested, including magistrates, military, judges, prosecutors, 131 media institutions closed (3 news agencies, 16 televisions, 23 radio stations, 45 newspapers, 15 magazines, 29 publishing houses), 35 medical institutions, 104 foundations, 109 student hostels, 934 private schools, 1,125 associations, 15 universities, 19 trade unions.<sup>23</sup> As the Turkish president has stated, “the revolt was a gift from Allah, because it will help us clean up the army”<sup>24</sup>, but, as mentioned above, the cleaning did not just stop at the army. The state of urgency decreed immediately after July 15<sup>th</sup> was prolonged on October 11<sup>th</sup> 2016, which means that mass cleansing can continue under legal guard.

In a referendum held on April 16<sup>th</sup> 2017, Turks voted to introduce a reform that gives more prerogatives to the president. The 18 amendments primarily addressed the prerogatives of executive and legislative power. These include:

*“The president will appoint the cabinet and will have a number of vice-presidents. The Parliament will no longer monitor ministers and will no longer have the right to initiate censure motions.*

*The president will no longer have to remain neutral, but will be able to maintain his political affiliation.*

*The number of Members of the Parliament increases from 550 to 600, and the minimum age is lowered to 18.*

*The President can be dismissed by Parliament. Currently, he can be prosecuted by the Treason Legislation.*

*Military Courts will be abolished.*

*The president will be able to name 4 of the 13 judges of the highest court in the country.”<sup>25</sup>*

Today, the Turks are much more preoccupied with what they say and how they behave in public, but too few are those who openly express their dissatisfaction with the atrocious actions of the government. Talks on the reintroduction of the death penalty only exacerbate the avalanche of criticism from the European Union, NATO and other international

<sup>22</sup>Safta & Felezeu 2011: 87.

<sup>23</sup>Middle East Institute: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/unpacking-turkey-s-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences> [Accessed on July 26, 2017]

<sup>24</sup>Euractiv: <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/erdogan-says-coup-was-gift-from-god-to-re-shape-country-punish-enemies/> [Accessed on July 27, 2017]

<sup>25</sup>The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/17/recep-tayyip-erdogan-won-turkish-referendum-happens-now/> [Accessed on July 27, 2017]

structures towards the Ankara government.<sup>26</sup> A country bathed in corruption scandals, with a widespread economy of endless terrorist attacks and unbalanced dialogue with its neighbours, a “prison country” for hundreds of journalists, a country with a president accused of populism and authoritarianism, who uses religiosity for political purposes, a president for whom the notion of freedom of expression is foreign, but who in July 2016 was saved by social media and the Internet, is the image of Turkey and its leadership in recent years.

### **Conclusions**

The failed coup of July 15<sup>th</sup> has radically changed the state of affairs in Turkey. Society suffered, I would say, a delayed metamorphosis. Overnight, thousands or even millions of “enemies” were arrested or traced to the welfare of the Turkish state. What was normal at one time did not seem normal after the failed coup. Thus, the mass purge began. Conspiracy theories, so common in Turkey, insist that the event of July 15<sup>th</sup> was well suited to Erdoğan’s regime. The next step made by the government was forcing the transition to the presidential-authoritarian regime desired by Erdoğan. The great nationwide purge that followed July 15<sup>th</sup>, mass arrests, political clashes, political speeches with the launch of serious accusations against those suspected of destabilizing order in the country, the spreading of fear in the society are nothing more than confirmations to those mentioned above, and Erdoğan's critics argue that his dictatorship is just beginning.

“De-Gülenizing” Turkey, a seemingly national problem could also be reflected internationally, leading to the destabilization and tensioning of relations with the United States, something less desirable for the Turkish people, but also for the rest of the world. Once subjected to Erdoğan’s administration, Turkey will become a more serious issue at regional level and for all its partners, including the European Union. This country is so divided and cut off by the AKP government that a regime change cannot avoid a civil conflict. This bleak outlook has been adopted lately by other voices in the international press that have begun to increasingly draw attention to massive corruption and to the almost total subordination by the AKP executive of justice and the press. It is therefore extremely important that the European Union and NATO, organizations with an important transformative role, support the restoration of the rule of law in Turkey.

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<sup>26</sup>Özcan 2012: 90.

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