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ERDOGAN, EUROPE AND THE 15TH OF JULY

Francesca Borri



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org



Erdogan, Europe and the 15th of July

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"We were fairly elected. And they tried to topple our government. But Americans and Europeans stayed silent. They talk so much of democracy, they talk so much of anything: and then that night they didn't say a word. We had tanks in the streets. But until it was clear that the coup had failed, they stayed silent. They left us alone."

Süleyman Soylu is the Interior minister of Turkey, and in theory, one year on from that 15th of July, we are listening to him to understand how his country has changed. But against the light, any portrait of Turkey is a portrait of Europe as well. And in these days, our roles often end up reversing: we are those to explain. Because Turks applied for EU membership in 1987. And over the last 30 years, they have been looking at Europe with admiration, then with disillusion. Then with disappointment. Now, simply, many of them look elsewhere.

In Europe, there are still doubts over the July 15 coup. According to several analysts, it was rather a controlled coup: controlled by Erdogan, who gambled, they say, and after intelligence warning, refrained from acting for profiting politically from what he later referred to, actually, as "a gift of God". The figures of the subsequent crackdown are impressive. And updated day by day: so far, 145,711 state employees have been dismissed, and out of 120,117 alleged plotters arrested, 56,114 are still in jail. But on the other hand, the images of that night, with its 249 victims, are likewise impressive. Jets that bomb, tanks that run over the crowd, the cars, random



gunshots: and the Turks, bare-handed, who cling on cannons, break down the barracks' gates. Grab the soldiers' rifles. Fall down dead. They are the same images of Tienanmen Square.

"The only difference, it's the world's reaction", says Mevlüt Cavusoglu, minister of Foreign Affairs. For world, he means Europeans and Americans, who turned down Erdogan's request to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the Imam believed to be the mastermind of the coup. Born in 1941 in a Turkey where Islam was still outlaw, Gülen tried to change the society from the bottom up by founding schools, and over time, also universities, newspapers, TV channels, banks, firms of all sorts: a kind of shadow state. He has been living in the United States since 1998. "And for us it is a matter of national security. July 15 was our 9/11," the minister says. "We are criticized because we want Gülen. But for bin Laden, the West invaded Afghanistan."

But who really is Gülen? The rhetoric of Erdogan's followers, who equate gulenists to jihadists, Kurds, thieves, thugs of all sorts, with such a bombastic language that translators get regularly lost, is of poor help, truthfully. But if no one, here, wastes time to tell you who they are, it's not because gulenists don't exist: it's because they are self-evident. And rather than a mere charity, they look like a sect. Gülen has actually tried to gradually erode the so called deep state of Atatürk's Turkey, that is, that invisible structure where in the end only seculars were in power, seculars well connected to the military: but his organization became in turn another deep state. "You must get into the veins of the system without being noticed," he once said in one of his rare interviews, "and reach all the centers of power. And only then you can act." Initially, Erdogan shared with Gülen this goal of the inclusion of Muslims in the Kemalist society. But in



2009 the gulenists, with now hundreds of affiliates working in the judiciary and the police, started a wave of political trials, a witch hunt that targeted mostly seculars and Kurds, and finally, Erdogan as well, with a corruption inquiry. Erdogan responded by shutting down their schools, newspapers, firms: and last year, when the time of the army had come, with the scheduled replacement of a number of generals, gulenists tried to foil his plans, and launched the coup - a coup that Dexter Filkins, on the New Yorker, termed in fact "the 30-year coup".

On the 15th of July Adil Oksüz, a theologian who is also a top member of the Gülen network, was in the Akinci airbase. The airbase the coup started from. He was just back from the United States. Arrested at 2 am, he claimed to be there to buy a lot of land. And that's what he said to judges, too: and he was released. "But you keep on saying that it was a fake coup," I am told confidentially by a deputy of Erdogan's party. "Of course some of us have some doubts. Those in jail are not all gulenists, and sometimes it's not a matter of mistakes, it's normal - I mean, normal not in the sense that it's just, but that it would happen anywhere. But if you just say that gulenists don't exist, or that we should lift the state of emergency, when in France the state of emergency is still in force for much less that tanks in the streets, you lose all your credibility. And no one will listen to you anymore. Not even when you are right."

For Europe, Erdogan is simply "the Sultan". But here no one forgets what he achieved in twenty years in power. Not even his opponents. The economy grew on average of 5 percent every year, and from being a country depending on IMF loans, Turkey is now a country that funds the IMF. But most of all, its middle class doubled, from 20 to 40 percent of the



population: one of the few cases of inequality's decrease. "And that's why Erdogan, here, is viewed as a champion of freedom and democracy. Because he included so many excluded," the deputy goes on. "Yesterday I read Amnesty International's appeal for the release of its director and president. The appeal where they remind Erdogan that years ago, when he was in jail, they defended his right to defend Islam, and campaigned for his liberation. We are going through tough times, yes. But in Atatürk's Turkey, I would have had no space. Erdogan made me free. Made me citizen."

For Turks like him, the 15th of July was the second war of independence, after the war of 1923. Independence from the military's tutelage. "It was the day we eventually became a fully-fledged democracy," he says. And a day which is now actually a sort of logo, with the number 15 nestled in the red crescent of the national flag: these days are a celebration, rather than commemoration. "But because this is a country that underwent four coups," he says. The latest was in 1997: against the first Islamist government, headed by Necmettin Erbakan. His Welfare Party was banned. And Erdogan's AK replaced it. "And during the whole night of July 15, you stayed silent. Here no one", he says, "trusts Europe anymore."

Algeria, Gaza, Egypt: and now Turkey. For any Muslim, all coups belong to the same thread, they are the same example of the duplicity of the West when it comes to democracy: when Islamists win the elections, they say, sooner or later the army steps in. Erdogan is viewed as the first who resisted. And not by chance, his symbol is the number 4, *rabia*, in Arabic, with four fingers raised. It stands for unity, "one flag, one nation, one state, one land", but it actually refers to Rabaa al-Adawiya square, in Cairo, the square of August 14, 2013: when general Sisi, who was restoring



democracy, for Europeans and Americans, ordered the assault on the Muslim Brothers encamped there against the coup. The dead were 817. "But the world", Erdogan said in a speech at the UN, addressing the Security Council, "the world is bigger than five".

He is striking, when he speaks. He sounds conservative, rather than Islamist, paternalist, rather than authoritarian, like a patriarch in the past: but most of all, Erdogan is impassive. He reveals no emotion. He speaks always with the same expression. Austere. And if the opposition doesn't want to listen to him anymore, and deserted the July 15 initiatives, his supporters as well are not really interested in what he's saying: they want hug him straight away: all his speeches end with a standing ovation - that often starts from journalists in the front row: not much more useful to understand Turkey than those who deny the coup. But it's because Erdogan, here, represents the awakening of Muslims for a long time excluded by society and history. And deeply divided: while Erdogan is viewed as the only one who really helped Syrians, by hosting 3 million refugees. The endless negotiations with the EU, now on hold, are to be seen against this background. Because in the end, they never started. In 30 years, only one of the 35 chapters under discussion was closed. The chapter on Science and Research. And for Erdogan the issue, bluntly, is that Europe doesn't want 80 million Muslims: and that it doesn't dare to admit it. Europe feels to have the upper hand: 46 percent of Turkey's exports are directed to Europe, and 76 percent of its foreign investments come from Europe - Turkey, without Europe, goes nowhere. But truthfully, Europe, too, without Turkey, goes nowhere, Carl Bildt remarks: only Turkey can open Europe to the Arab Muslim world, and



turn it into a real international player. And give it a common identity stronger than a common currency.

"When we talk with you, Europeans, we always feel like second class human beings," says the AK deputy. "And now that's the result. This tit-for-tat of mutual recriminations. Because here it's not that one says to the other: I am better than you, no, he says: You are worst than me. In an endless, and pointless, downward spiral."

Especially because Erdogan, it's true, has more power now: but this doesn't mean he is stronger. "In the coup's aftermath, we were all united, government and opposition, seculars and Islamists. Turks and Kurds. But that spirit went lost," he says. "And Gülen can't be faced only with arrests: and exactly because it's a real problem, like the military in Egypt. For Erdogan, moreover, like for all charismatic leaders, won't be easy to find heirs. Succession will occur when many enemies will be just out of jail, thirsty for revenge."

"No", he says, "we are not solving anything. We are simply deferring the problem."

For now, yet, a crowd carefully split into two, women on one side men on the other, waves the flag of Turkey. They are thousands and thousands. And they are all for Erdogan. The night of the 15th of July, here, looks like a rock concert. The lights, the music. After each of the 249 names of the victims, the crowd cries out: He's alive, and then it shouts: *Idam isteriz!* - We want execution. And Erdogan, in yet another challenge to this Europe that rejected him, that stayed silent, says he won't oppose it. "I don't care what the West says, I care only what Turks say," he says. "Whoever attacks



Turkey, now knows what the price is," he says, and he looks at the victims' relatives, who are on the stage, a step down, while the crowd starts again: *Idam isteriz! Idam isteriz!* The state has supported the relatives, both financially and morally. But despite it, they are here now, the only ones sitting. The only ones in silence, they stand still, with the picture of a son, of a brother, of a father, and this steady gaze, steady and empty, under the buzz of a drone of the press that looks like a UFO, looks like a fairground, it lights up, it turns green, blue, red, as they are there, in silence, in between Erdogan and the crowd: a Bosnian journalist, wrapped in a flag, dances wildly in front of a man with head bowed - and because it's all a tit-for-tat of mutual recriminations, in these days, in these months, but in the end you die, and no, you are not alive anymore, you are dead and nothing else, and there's nothing to say, even when they call you hero, even when they honour you. You are missed and that's it.