

## **Research Report 21**

### **Turkey Looks Ahead**

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**The AKP's victory and the subsequent uncertainty surrounding the constitution will not change Turkey's foreign policy objectives or geopolitical perspective in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. However, there could be new accents and nuances - with repercussions for the interests of both NATO and the EU.**

By Plamen Pantev for ISN Insights

The results of Turkey's 12 June parliamentary elections - despite the challenge from Kemalist and pro-Islamic elements - give the Justice and Development Party (AKP) yet another chance to pursue its foreign policy objectives and geopolitical ambitions into the next electoral period and perhaps beyond.

The years ahead will present major challenges for the EU, in which Turkey has sought membership since 1959. But NATO - of which Turkey is a leading member - will also face hurdles, as will the broader Middle East, where many of the democracies that may emerge from the 'Arab Spring' could look to Turkey as a model.

#### **Erdogan delivers**

In the last six years, the foreign policy of Erdogan's AKP government has had some notable successes.

First, it has exploited Turkey's unique geoeconomic and geostrategic position to bolster its economy, become a key regional energy power and progress gradually toward recognition as a genuine player on the global

stage.

Second, it refused to take Turkey's failure to attain EU membership as a political setback. On the contrary, Turkey continues to understand that meeting the EU membership criteria is a worthwhile goal in its own right, at the same time keeping open the option of a 'privileged partnership' with the Union and rejecting the notion that not being a member of the EU condemns the country to 'non-Europeanness'.

Third, it has promoted an image of Turkey as a regional power worthy of respect, with ambitions for EU-membership that were probably unrealistic, but strong enough to play a political game of global significance. This image gives Turkey credibility when blocking calls for a new approach towards Cyprus, a Union member. And at the same time Turkey has preserved normal relations with its eastern and southern neighbors, despite rising tensions with Syria, caused by the influx of more than 10,000 immigrants. Fourth, developments in the Middle East in recent months have underlined Turkey's importance as a trans-Atlantic partner. The shifting balance of power in the Middle East, from Tunisia to Turkey's own southern border, promises to turn traditional autocratic regimes into democratic ones - raising the specter of a new regional stability, with diminished Islamic threat perceptions in the West and new opportunities for local governments and societies to control radical religious elements.

### **The regional standard-bearer?**

For many in the Middle East, Turkey is now the standard for a democratic political system, a market economy and a free society. The victorious AKP is usually quick to highlight this 'soft power' aspect of Turkey's potential as a European and trans-Atlantic ally, providing unique opportunities for the Union and NATO in the 'new' Middle East and the Islamic world in general. At such a promising time, however, Turkey is also showing troubling signs of backsliding into old autocratic habits - and the election has not put these concerns to rest. Protests against human rights abuses continue and, in recent months, Turkey has been guilty of silencing journalists and imposing restrictions on Internet access.

To be a model for the region, Turkey must demonstrate a much clearer

commitment to the principles it so often espouses abroad. This is a big challenge for the new AKP government from an external, but no less importantly from an internal and regional, point of view.

Ankara is a significant ally of the West, and the latter sincerely fears that it may lose Turkey as a friend. Nevertheless, Turkey's western allies and partners continue to remain undecided as to whether the country can be the 'model case' they hope for.

*Dr Plamen Pantev is Professor in International Relations and International Law at Sofia University, and Founder and Director of the Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), Sofia.*