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## Turkey and Europe after the Cold War Years: A Journey towards Destination Unknown.

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## Introduction

The end of the Cold War years caused several breaks: a break of the prevailing system as well as a break of traditions and habits – as the world system changed from a bipolar to a multipolar world and thus confronted its players with a rather decisive game change (Aydın 2004: 62). Hence, the end of the superpowers' struggle for world hegemony brought new challenges and chances for states throughout the world – a circumstance which had a crucial impact on states' foreign policy, further asking them to work within the new structures and hence adjusting its external approaches accordingly. The latter is especially true for Turkey, as the country's "foreign policy was conducted within well-known parameters" (ibid.) for more than 40 years. During the Cold War period, Turkey was able to conduct its foreign policy in a rather stable and balanced external environment (ibid.): Positioned in between the United States and the Soviet Union, Turkey was continuously allied with the West due to ideological reasons, security interests as well as Turkey's lack of resources – even there was limited room for manoeuvre noticeable in the final years of the Cold War period (Hale 2013: 78-134). Moreover, the bipolar system also affected Turkey's foreign policy in regional terms, as the country stuck to a policy of isolationism towards its neighbouring countries (Aydın 2004: 62).

Hence, as a result of the collapse of the communist system, the concomitant disappearance of the 'Soviet threat' and the emergence of a number of new states challenged Turkey's traditional foreign policy and raised a number of important questions for Turkey as well as the outside world. More precisely, it was especially the relationship with the West and Turkey, which asked for a new definition of their common ground and interests, benefits as well as commitments. The latter can be identified as a major challenge, especially for Turkey as a "status quo power" (Robins 2003: 6) – being rather defined as a cautious and passive

actor in foreign affairs while at the same time relying on a self-created identity and being preoccupied with domestic affairs like several military coups or the Kurdish issue (Uzer 2011: 74; Aydın 2004: 62). Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to find answers to the following questions: How did Turkey position itself towards Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War years? What have been the determining factors causing Turkey's new path of foreign policy and how can this change be evaluated?

## Argument

Starting by looking at the initial situation and the determining factors, one first crucial aspect of Turkey's repositioning during the Cold War was actually based on its identity and Western acknowledgement of the latter – an acknowledgement consolidated by the simplicity of the bipolar world system itself: Indeed, Turkey found its recognition as a European ally due to its mutual interests based on Western and especially United States' struggle against the communist world as well as Turkey's need for external protection and aid (Hale 2013: 78-83; Cleveland and Bunton 2009: 276-277). Furthermore, the country's chosen path towards alliance with the West and its self-created European identity served as the essential parameters that enabled Turkey to conduct a consistent and stable foreign policy (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 79). However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, these parameters were not given anymore and Turkey's foreign policy started to be obsolete and ineffective: Indeed, the decrease of the 'Soviet threat' and the newly emerging system of multifarious actors undermined Turkey's international role and further caused the risk for the Turkish state to become an obstacle rather than an ally of enrichment (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 79; Hale 2013: 135-136). Hence, as mentioned before, the end of the Cold War period marked a crucial game changer, which Turkey had to adapt to in terms of its foreign policy approach.

With reference to the latter, the foresaid remarks can be further linked to the emergence of Turkey's identity crisis in the aftermath of the Cold War years. Once again, this struggle was caused by the given system change – being triggered by Turkey's external environment: According to Bozdağlıoğlu, “an actor's self-created corporate identity must be recognized and accepted by others” (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 79-80). Against this background, it were actually the European countries that started to question Turkey's European character by problematizing differences between Europe and Turkey in terms of contradicting cultural values, attitudes and approaches – further being the initial trigger for Turkey's identity crisis and increasing frustration (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 80-82). Nevertheless, there were also reservations on the Turkish side – pointing to obligations which were not conform with Turkey's own economical or national interests like in the case of the EU-Turkey Customs Union as well as the Cyprus issue (ibid.). Moreover, these reservations were strengthened through Europe's rejection of Turkey's candidate status for full EU membership in 1989 and 1997 – further leading to public discussions around the attempt of Turkey “being European without being in Europe” (ibid.: 83). Nonetheless, it were especially the Turks who linked Europe's rejection to the cultural sphere, while Europe was also addressing points of conflict concerning human rights abuses as well as shortcomings of the country's economy and its political system – hence, being also linked to internal developments of previous Cold War years (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 83; Aydın 2004: 60).

The foresaid remarks address another important aspect of the issue, as it directly links the external dimension to the domestic one: Indeed, cultural aspects and internal developments during 1990's as well as in previous years had a crucial impact on Turkey's outside perception as well as on its foreign policy and positioning towards Europe (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003; Robins 2003). The latter becomes obvious by looking at Europe's direct criticism and concerns – referring to differences in

religious, historical and ideological matters, contradictions concerning the economic system, the Kurdish issue as well as the unstable nature of the political sphere due to previous military coups (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 92-94; Robins 2003: 134-159; Aydın 2004: 60). Moreover, the observed aspect can be identified as a mutual flow of influence from both sides – domestic to foreign and vice versa. As Bozdağlıoğlu remarks, Europe's recognition of Turkey's European identity and membership status is not only seen “as the last step of Turkey's modernization project” (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 83) – it would also resolve anti-West attitudes in Turkey by creating no opportunity structure for Islamists and nationalists to take over political power (ibid.: 90). In addition to the latter, also other impacts can be named, which had a positive effect on Turkish-European relations – pointing for instance to the economic liberalization process in 1980's, which was initiated by Turgut Özal (Kirişçi 2009: 38-43). With reference to the foresaid remarks, it can be also underlined that the impact of domestic affairs on foreign policy further gained in importance in the aftermath of the Cold War period – a circumstance caused by Turkey's weakened role within the Western alliance and its concomitant decreasing leverage to oppose Europe's interests.

Looking further at the repositioning of Turkey after the Cold War period, the early years of the 1990s were particularly coloured by instability and uncertainty due to Turkey's identity crisis and its search for a new foreign policy direction (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 80). Hence, the altered world system combined with Europe's rejection and the country's identity crisis paved the way for more activism in Turkey's foreign policy concerning especially the regional environment (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Aydın 2004: 60). This new regionalism was further encouraged by the emergence of new neighbouring states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which had ethnic and cultural linkages with Turkey – an aspect which gave rise to the idea of Turkey being able to play



an important role throughout the region (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 89-97). This approach is also illustrated in Turgut Özal's approach of interdependence and further led to a number of economic and energy-based project attempts (Kirişci 2009: 43; Öniş and Yılmaz 2009: 10). However, Turkey's rather emotional approach of ethnic solidarity couldn't meet mutual interests in all terms; in contrast, the relationship faced a number of problems due to the Central Asian and Caucasus countries' scepticism towards Turkey, the states' close ties with Russia as well as Turkey's overestimation concerning their ethnic bond (Bozdağlıoğlu 2003: 98-101). Due to this circumstance as well as Turkey's long-term Western alliance and its self-created European identity, Turkey continued to keep its ties with Europe, while adding new components through multi-dimensional alliances with countries of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus (Aydın 2004: 62). Furthermore, Turkey started to emphasize its "role in bridging different cultures and geographical settings" (ibid.: 62) – an approach which can be also linked to the emergence of the 'bridge or barrier' discussion and Turkey's attempt to underline the former – as being the right definition for its new positioning (Hale 2016: 136).

## Conclusion

Coming to the concluding remarks, the end of the Cold War period brought along new challenges and obstacles for Turkey and its foreign policy: The change of the world system towards a multipolar world led to the emergence of new neighbouring countries and meant a game change for its previously existing players – altering leverages and dependence relationships, common grounds and interests, as well as benefits and commitments. The latter was especially true for Turkey and Europe, as Europe's rejection of Turkey's self-created European identity – for political, cultural as well as economic reasons – caused an identity crisis, which further intensified Turkey's

uncertainty about its future path in the aftermath of the Cold War years. Hence, it were a number of outside factors, which rendered Turkey's previous foreign-policy ineffective – further forcing Turkey to approach more actively in terms of foreign affairs through seeking alternatives and adapting to the new world system. Concerning the Turkish state's new positioning, the country redefined itself as a bridge between West and East – underlining its importance for both sides. However, this approach can be seen as the only realizable 'middle way' approach, as the newly formed alliances with Turkey's neighbours implicated certain problems concerning the countries' different interests as well as various points of conflict and scepticism. Furthermore, it was Turkey's long-term alliance and self-created European identity, which forced it to keep ties with Europe while just adding new components to its international relations. In addition to the foresaid, the given observation has also contributed to the evaluation of Turkey's approach in terms of its altering process and repositioning – uncovering two main aspects: First of all, a continuous interdependence of the domestic and foreign domain can be identified – even gaining importance after the Cold War period due to Turkey's loss of importance within the Western alliance. Furthermore, Turkey's new activism in terms of foreign policy during the 1990's can be described as a rather reactive approach – an observation, which keeps Turkey still in the position of a passive actor. Hence, the end of the Cold War period can't be interpreted as an opportunity window, which Turkey self-sufficient used, but rather as a trigger for Turkish government to take action for change. Nevertheless, even Turkey's first steps throughout the 1990's seemed to have no clear destination, the country's new activism and approaches paved the way for new horizons in the beginning of the upcoming century – pointing to Ahmet Davutoğlu's new foreign strategy as well as 1999's Helsinki Summit and the concomitant start of Turkey's EU accession process.

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