

# The Scary European Model

Aug 2, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**T**here has been speculation about where Turkey is heading ever since the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. The early years suggested to most observers that Turkey was heading West, as the AKP lobbied hard for membership in the European Union, and pushed the liberal-democratic and free-market reforms that membership requires. Lately, the consensus view has shifted 180 degrees. As Europe makes clear its resistance to welcoming a Muslim-majority member, Turkey seems to be positioning itself as a regional power broker among its Islamist neighbors, most dramatically by casting a no vote against U.N. sanctions on Iran.

Our view is a bit different: Turkey is heading toward a European model, but it is neither modern nor liberal. It is the East European model of the 1940s, when communist parties took power in democratic elections, only to subvert democracy and veil their nations behind the Iron Curtain. After the Czechoslovak Communist Party won the 1946 elections, it quickly undermined one of Eastern Europe's most progressive democracies. By 1948 the communists had quieted all opposition by various means, including the infamous defenestration of a top moderate politician in Prague. Within two years Czechoslovakia had joined the communist bloc. The rise of an illiberal party that would radically change its country's foreign policy would foreshadow AKP's conduct decades later. This is not to equate communism with Islamism; rather, both movements, rooted in an illiberal ideology, see democracy as a means to an end and espouse a Manichaean, us vs. them mentality.

There were early signs in the AKP's visceral anti-American rhetoric and its banishment of women from top posts, as well as the arrests and firings of political rivals. These signs were mostly ignored because, at the time, the AKP also promoted EU accession and pragmatic ties with the United States, even while bashing the West. But during the eight years of AKP rule, the party's rhetoric has significantly shaped majority opinion. More than 90 percent of Turks read and write only Turkish, and rely on Turkish media sources now either intimidated by or controlled outright by the AKP. Under the AKP, wiretaps of political opponents have become so common that restaurants now offer to check cell phones so citizens can deposit their phones before sitting down for dinner, to prevent eavesdropping.

The AKP's early anti-Western rhetoric signaled hidden foreign-policy goals that are now coming to light. After weakening democratic checks and balances -- by imposing tax fines on the media and wiretaps on opponents to stifle dissent -- the AKP feels comfortable enough in power to match its foreign policy to its rhetoric. It will continue to face away from the West, even if it ostensibly remains in NATO. The AKP will continue to defend Islamist leaders -- from Sudan's Omar al-Bashir to Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- against the demands of the international community. Domestically, the AKP will continue to trample on free media, gender equality, and democratic safeguards such as an independent judiciary.

But hope remains. By the postwar Czechoslovak political clock, the year in Turkey is 1947. The authoritarian party does not yet have full control. Turkey remains a multiparty democracy and, as of the last elections, only one third of voters supports the AKP. While the secular Republican People's Party previously had no answer to the grassroots organization of the AKP or the anti-Western populism of AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it now has a real leader in Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a charismatic social democrat. International pressure may yet block some AKP

ambitions, especially if the U.S. and others speak up. And thankfully, no Soviet tanks wait in the wings to suppress the Turkish people's will.

Yet most liberal Turks still refuse to recognize their own political failure. One still hears them suggest -- absurdly -- that European and American leaders placed the AKP in power. To gain ground in the 2011 elections, non-Islamists need to return to grassroots politics. In the meantime, the West must stand with democracy by ensuring free and fair elections and maintaining a level political playing field. Either liberals unite now, or the clock moves to 1948.

Soner Cagaptay and David Pollock are senior fellows at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Newsweek

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)