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The future of Erdoğan and the AKP

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ABSTRACT

Turkish politics is complex and, at times, comes close to being bizarre. When the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]) came to power it embarked on ambitious economic and political reforms that at last promised to bring embedded democracy to Turkey. Yet, since 2007, most of the initial reforms have regressed, deepening societal cleavages that threaten the stability of the country, and a popularly elected president threatens to change the parliamentary democratic system with an autocratic presidential order. While the AKP can celebrate in its unprecedented four election victories since 2002, its recent actions should give concern to anyone who cares about the future of Turkey.

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Introduction

Once again, Turkey is standing at crossroads of political development. What seemed to be a promising reform movement that started during the early 2000s that closely followed accession requirements of the European Union (EU) has been replaced by a grim picture of illiberal political developments that are characterized by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's power grab, loss of judicial independence, and electoral manipulations to achieve the desired election outcome that favored Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]) in November 2015. Turkey's democratic future hinges on how the current relationship between President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu will play out. The apparent choice is between establishing a popularly elected imperial president on the one hand and establishing a more representative parliamentary body on the other. This brief commentary looks back as well as forward, examining the factors behind the rise to power of AKP and assessing the future of

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Erdoğan and AKP as key stakeholders that will undoubtedly shape the future political scene of Turkey.

Rise of the AKP and Erdoğan

The rise of Islamist-oriented political parties in Turkey is a success story in party adaptation, because despite constant attacks from the secular establishment, especially the military, they keep returning to the political scene, albeit under new names. Political parties, of course, play a significant role in consolidation of democracy where they serve as vehicles of public voice and action.¹ According to Eldersveld and Walton, functioning democracies need political parties to fulfill a number of important tasks that include organizing public participation in politics; control and recruitment of elites; conflict management; competition management; policy innovation; and most significantly, socializing the public to system consensus and constitutional order of the country.²

Given the central role parties play in modern democracies it is crucial to note that their survival depends on the ability of party elites to successfully adapt to changing environments and voter realignment. In other words, party adaptation and realignment are at the heart of how and why some parties succeed and others fail. As individual citizens' attitudes, beliefs, and values change, their participation in the political process reflects these changes. For successful party adaptation, leadership and organization are very important. Leaders ought to recognize not only the policy needs of the country but also see the changes in the party's support base and implement reforms that reflect these changes within the party structure. Leaders' charisma and party organization are also important attributes for expanding the party's electoral base.

The AKP, while being a new party, capitalized on its predecessors' (*Refah* and *Fazilet* parties) massive societal infrastructure and entered the political scene in 2001–02 as a fully functional political party. Three crucial developments aided its founders in this effort. First was the break up of the *Fazilet* (Virtue) Party and split among its leadership between the old guard traditionalists (*gelenekçiler*) and the new reformists (*yenilikçiler*). The reformists formed the AKP and succeeded in getting the support of most of the former *Fazilet* representatives while the traditionalists formed the Felicity (*Saadet*) Party, which became a minor player on the political scene. The AKP leadership met every aspect of political party adaptation (choice of able leaders, dynamic party organization, adapting an ideological line and direction of the party to match public opinion shifts, choice clear strategies and tactics, and recruitment of party activists who work relentlessly to expand the party's social base) and also seemed to satisfy the main roles of political parties in functioning democracies. The leadership of the new

party included individuals who were charismatic and broke rank with the old-guard. It was of mixed ideological orientation. The AKP promised extensive political and economic reforms, membership in the EU, and solving the Cyprus problem. It called for a new type of political party to attract support from both liberal and conservative circles.³

The second factor behind the rise of AKP was the inability of the center-right political parties, Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*) and the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*), to meet requirements of adaptation, thus leaving a vacuum on the political center-right. As shown by Kalaycıoğlu ("Justice and Development Party at the Helm," 29–44) there was significant voter realignment during the mid-1990s in Turkey where the entire voter bloc moved toward the political right, collapsing the center and giving steady rise in to the political right.⁴ Another significant factor behind this shift was the rising religiosity in Turkey since 1994.⁵ Additional research on social values in Turkey further sheds light on why the conservative AKP is able to attract support from a large segment of the Turkish electorate. Using the World Values Survey (1991–2011) Yesilada and Noordijk found Turkish society to be more traditional and religious than other European countries and that the trend was toward more traditional/religious value orientation.⁶ Findings on voter realignment and societal values thus clearly show the preference of the electorate for conservative/traditional political parties.

The third factor behind the AKP's success was the financial crisis of 2001 when the electorate held old secular parties responsible. In February 2001, the Central Bank of Turkey abandoned the inflation targeting fixed exchange rate regime five months prematurely, under less than optimal circumstances. The IMF engineered stabilization plan, put into play in December 1999 after a year of abysmal economic performance, was to control inflation but collapsed in November 2000.⁷ Despite a massive injection of \$7.5 billion in IMF funding in December 2000, the coalition government was forced to devalue the Turkish lira on February 22, 2001. The cost of the crisis and economic restructuring for the Turkish economy was significant. GNP fell by 8.5 percent in 2001 while inflation rose to 86 percent, and the public sector borrowing requirement jumped to 19.6 percent of GDP. In the eyes of the public, the old guard was guilty of profound mismanagement.

Voters took out their frustration at the national elections of 2002. The only other party that managed to clear the 10 percent national election threshold was the social democratic Republican Peoples Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) which was not part of the previous coalition government. Since 2002, the AKP won four more national election victories—a success that is unprecedented in contemporary Turkish politics. It received 34.3 percent of the vote and 363 seats in 2002; 46.6 percent and 341 seats in 2007; 49.9 percent and 326 seats in 2011; 40.9 percent 258 seats in June 2015; and 49.5 percent and 317 seats in November 2015.

The last election highlighted (now President) Erdoğan's ambition to obtain a qualified majority (60 percent) for AKP to engineer constitutional changes to his liking. When the June 2015 elections failed to give AKP the majority of seats in the National Assembly, Erdoğan did everything he could to prevent the formation of a coalition government and pushed for early elections in November. During that time, Erdoğan violated his constitutional powers and campaigned in favor of AKP, criticized other political parties, and launched a massive campaign against the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) which resulted in increased terrorist campaign by the latter. Furthermore, he permitted the USA to use the Incirlik airbase to bomb ISIS positions in Syria and Iraq which, in turn, resulted in ISIS bombings in Süruç and Ankara. The net result, as documented in the lead-in piece by Mehmet Barakçı, was loss of voter support for two smaller parties, the Kurdish-oriented Peoples' Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* [HDP]) and the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* [MHP]) and a net gain for the AKP.

The rise of AKP to power in Turkey has been hotly debated among academic and policy circles.⁸ On the one hand, liberal-oriented scholars and writers hailed it as a turning point in Turkish history in which a group of politicians with Islamist roots could form a "Christian-democratic"-style political party that would finally end the tug of war between Islamists and laïcists (secularists) and fill the gap on the center-right of the political spectrum. They also argued that the reformists, led by Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, would lead Turkey on a path that would break down the old "deep" state and bring about socioeconomic and political progress. Others held a more cautious view and warned about quick judgment on the AKP's impact on Turkey's socioeconomic and political future and called attention to the Islamist roots of party's leadership and a possible hidden Islamist agenda.

There is no doubt that the last 13 years of AKP rule in Turkey has been filled with significant economic accomplishments, as well as debacles that would make observers' heads spin. Under Erdoğan's leadership, early AKP governments managed to make significant progress in the EU harmonization process that resulted in tremendous economic growth, diversification of Turkey's foreign trade regime, increase in foreign investment, and securing agreements for more energy pipelines to pass through the country. Data obtained from the World Bank show that GDP/capita adjusted purchasing power parity by year was \$8158 (2000); \$10,030 (2006); and \$11,632 (2013).⁹ Moreover, during the recent global financial crisis, the Turkish economy contracted -5.7 percent but quickly recovered to grow by 3.8 percent in 2010.¹⁰

On the political front, initial reforms undertaken by the AKP significantly improved Turkey's democratic status and led to the opening of accession talks with the EU in 2005. Perhaps the most significant among these reform

measures were those on civil-military relations that delegated the once-powerful National Security Council to an advisory role and gradually put the armed forces under civilian authority. Other reforms included the right of civil servants to collective bargaining, elimination of legal barriers against political strikes, lockouts, and solidarity strikes and lockouts; and reinforcement of the principle of privacy of personal matters and information. However, other aspects of various reform packages that revised separation of power between Turkey's executive and judiciary raised serious concerns about the concentration of powers in the hands of the executive branch. Furthermore, whereas some reforms strengthened individuals' right to privacy, in actual daily practice the AKP government increased its surveillance activities in pursuit of those who were suspected of plotting coups against the government.

These latter concerns raised questions about the nature and intent of reforms. These became clearer soon after the 2007 presidential elections when Erdoğan started to advocate for a presidential system with extensive decision-making powers. While he did not succeed in changing the political system, Erdoğan increasingly became autocratic and used excessive force to silence any and all opposition. Examples include the Gezi Park events of May/June 2013, systematic arrest of scores of journalists who dared to criticize or insult him, spying on ordinary people and passing of new law that empowers the intelligence agency to collect private data without the need for a court order. Perhaps the most significant of his purge was against the Turkish military—an institution that always viewed the slightest Islamist policies as threat to the state. Through trumped up charges, still unclear whether mutually designed between Erdoğan and networks aligned to Fethullah Gülen or made single-handedly by the latter, 300 active and retired high ranking officers were sent to prison through conspiracy cases like *Balyoz* and *Ergenekon*. Yet, interestingly enough, after Erdoğan and Gülen had a falling out in December 2013, most of the accused were ordered released from prison on June 19, 2014 and many were later acquitted on March 31, 2015. Other cases have been sent to the *Yargıtay* (Supreme Court) for reevaluation.¹¹ Following accusations of corruption against Erdoğan, his family, and cabinet ministers of corruption and bribery, Erdoğan swiftly moved to crush Gülen's power base in Turkey and purged several thousand police officers and prosecutors and judges allegedly aligned with Gülen, accusing them of plotting to bring down the government. He then accused Gülen of treason and of attempting a coup by establishing a "parallel structure" within the state. Erdoğan did achieve his ambition of becoming president through popular elections in August 2014, but he did not succeed in creating his desired presidential system. Since 2014, he has focused much energy on how to gain a sufficient majority in the National Assembly to make constitutional reforms to establish a presidential system.

On the foreign policy front, the AKP and Erdoğan attempted to reorient Turkey's focus toward the Middle East while maintaining sufficient ties to the Western alliance. Their main ambition of "zero problems with neighbors" was based on a mixture of cultural/historical neo-Ottomanism with notions of "strategic depth." While the goals were ambitious, by 2015 this policy was in shambles, causing serious problems with many of Turkey's neighbors. Perhaps this is nowhere better demonstrated than in current military campaign in Syria where Turkey has found itself at odds with not only Assad's allies, Iran and Russia, but also with the USA and other Western allies, whose top priority (unlike Ankara's) is destroying ISIS. Furthermore, Erdoğan and the AKP's emphasis on sectarian policies alienated not only the Alevis within Turkey but Shi'a Turkomans in Syria and Iraq.

What's next for the AKP and Erdoğan?

The Turkish experiment in democratic politics is complex and, at times, comes close to being bizarre. When the AKP came to power it embarked on such ambitious economic and political reforms that many followers of Turkish politics viewed the new political elite as "God sent." Yet, since 2007, this picture began to change and took a turn to the worse as of 2010. Most of the initial gains provided in the reforms were reversed. For all practical purposes, power has become concentrated in the hands of the president, even if this is unconstitutional. Turkey is at a true crossroads. As Kalaycıoğlu notes:

the choice is between establishing a popularly elected authoritarian despot as president on the one hand and legislative supremacy (establishing a more representative election rule and a more contemporary parliamentary body, and operating within the law to practice liberal representative democracy) on the other.¹²

If Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu were to rally sufficient support from AKP parliamentarians and tell Erdoğan to mind his own business within his constitutionally defined powers, there would be hope of moving forward with a liberal representative parliamentary system that would bring Turkey closer to the Western democracies. Yet, Davutoğlu, who was handpicked by Erdoğan to succeed him as prime minister, has neither the charisma nor the support network his "boss" enjoys. In fact, Davutoğlu seems more worried about being replaced by another Erdoğan-picked candidate at a future AKP Congress and looks unwilling to challenge the President's authority. Given recent election results, the choice of political system facing Turkey is between electoral authoritarianism of a Turkish style Presidential system (*Türk tipi Başkanlık*) and a parliamentary democracy. The Turkish style presidential system is defined by Erdoğan as one where there are very

limited checks and balances.¹³ He clearly favors the concept of popularly elected president who is only accountable to the electorate. This is a very dangerous notion as it signals a majoritarian view of democracy, in contrast to a liberal view that seeks to limit state power and uphold individual rights. As yet, no one within the AKP ranks is willing to confront Erdoğan to prevent this slide into uncharted waters. What is really disturbing is that while Erdoğan failed to attain the necessary 330 seats for AKP to enable him to change the Constitution through a referendum, he and his loyal followers within the party have many it quite clear that the president will be the one calling the shots for the government with or without such change.¹⁴ One possibility is that Erdoğan might succeed to convincing other members of other political parties, potentially from MHP, to support AKP for a new constitution. Prime Minister Davutoğlu seems to have accepted Erdoğan's control of AKP's rank and file but seems somewhat uncomfortable with the current "dual executive" arrangement between the two. When asked about the transition to a presidential system, Davutoğlu response was that "it is not healthy to keep bringing up this subject day and night, we need to make the best of the current system ... dual executive roles have always existed."¹⁵

How is it possible for Erdoğan to keep such a firm grip over the AKP? There is no denial that he is proud and self-confident, often arrogant and vindictive. He enjoys immense popularity among a large sector Turkish society by projecting the image of a strong leader. They call him *Reis* (captain or leader of the country). This attribute is dangerously valued among most of the Turkish society regardless of their political leanings.¹⁶ As Harold Lasswell noted many years ago about powerful leaders, Erdoğan is equally successful to display his personal motives on public objects and to rationalize them in terms of public interest.¹⁷ He is able to "reach and touch" those who are from lower classes and manipulate their feelings by frequent referrals to Ottoman past greatness and Islamic values. With respect to the latter, he is keen on promoting sectarian Sunni values and institutions that would spread Islamic principles as true values of society as opposed to Kemalist laicism. He views his role as the "legitimate" leader of the faithful and expect all who are below him to bow to his preferences. This is typical of a former *mürîd* (faithful follower) mentality and explains, in part, why he is unwilling to step aside and be an impartial president. Erdoğan was a *mürîd* under the late Necmettin Erbakan dating back to 1970s as a youth leader of the National Salvation Party. His rise to the helm of AKP is an impressive story of political intrigues that deserve in-depth analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper. As far as he is concerned, he has paid his dues to reach this position and is likely to insist on becoming the *Türk tipi Başkan*. In short, for the immediate future there seems no apparent political actor or coalition that is capable of stopping Erdoğan from achieving his ambitions.

However, policies of AKP governments have led to deepening of two serious societal cleavages in Turkey that have the potential of destroying both Erdoğan and the party. These are the Islamist-*Laïcist* and Turkish-Kurdish nationalism cleavages. As previously noted, one role political parties should play in a functioning democracy is socializing the public toward system consensus. In this area one can conclude that AKP has been a failure. It has become apparent that the AKP has been implementing Erdoğan's steady promotion of Islam throughout Turkey's bureaucracies and in public schools to raise what he calls a "new religious generation" and promote a more religious/traditional Turkey with the goal of revoking *laïcité*. Given the fact that this is one of the founding pillars of Turkish Republic, the organized attempt to change it and socialize individuals to be hostile to the concept of *laïcité* can be viewed as being less than system-oriented if not counterrevolutionary. Continued push for Islamist-based socialization in public schools, Imam Hatip schools, and Koran schools with such a political agenda is further deepening the Islamist-*Laïcist* cleavage in the country. If the AKP and *laïcist* camps were come to a common agreement on a Turkish version of this principle of separation of state and religious affairs, resolution could be made. That might have been possible before 2011 when more secular minded politicians were present among AKP members in parliament. It seems less likely in the near future and could degenerate into violent confrontations between the followers of each camp.

The second societal cleavage is increasingly becoming violent and spills over to Turkish relations with her southern neighbors, Syria and Iraq. Initially, Erdoğan's policy for "a solution" to the Kurdish problem was welcomed by almost all except the ultranationalist MHP. However, as the Kurdish Political Party (HDP) became a serious challenger in the June 2015 elections, Erdoğan made a 180 degree turn and simultaneously launched an attack, one verbal and the other armed, on HDP and PKK, and accused Kurdish politicians of openly supporting the terrorists. At the time of writing, hostilities between Turkish security forces and PKK terrorists continue in southeastern Turkey with a rising death toll that includes civilians. Under these conditions it is highly unlikely that a just and lasting solution can be found for Turkey's Kurdish problem. A more likely scenario is intensified fighting that will see increased cross-border incursions by Turkish air force and army.

Additionally, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have failed miserably in regional foreign and security policies. Not only have they not achieved the desired goal of "zero problems with neighbors" they have placed Turkey in crossfire of great powers. Bilateral problems with every neighbor remain steady, if not intensified. Key failures include relations with the EU, Israel and Syria. With the EU, relations steadily soured following the failure of the Annan Plan in Cyprus in 2004 and election of anti-Turkish leaders in some European

countries like Austria, France and Germany. The AKP leadership also chose to look to relations with the Middle East and only paid lip service to improving relations with Europe. In this respect, one could note that earlier EU-led political reforms enabled the AKP to remove the threat of the military and weakened the hand of the secular establishment. As Erdogan consolidated his power over the state, he no longer needed the EU to counter any potential threat from the military. As a result, EU accession talks came to a halt and did not regain any momentum until the refugee crisis in Europe necessitated a more conciliatory approach to Turkey by the EU. On December 14, 2015, the EU finally agreed to open another chapter (Chapter 17 on Economic and Monetary Policy) in accession talks. During the previous two years no new chapter was opened. The likelihood of the EU speeding the accession process in a substantial way is unlikely given the nature of criticism the latest 2015 Commission Report that outlines regressive developments along democratic requirements.¹⁸ That is, as long as AKP submits to Erdoğan's ambition for imperial presidency, there is no way Turkey will satisfy the democratic *acquis* of the EU.

As for Israel, the AKP's anti-Israeli rhetoric, the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, and Turkey's support to Hamas and other enemies of Israel destroyed the strategic alliance between the two countries. This move not only resulted in a loss of important partnership in industrial and technological cooperation. It presented Israel as an ally to Turkey's arch rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus and Greece, something that leaders of these two countries could not have previously imagined as possible. However, energy politics in the Eastern Mediterranean might lead to some degree of rapprochement between Israel and Turkey for transferring Israel's natural gas to EU markets through a Turkish pipeline.

Syria, on the other hand, exposed how inexperienced and dangerous Erdoğan and his advisors are in foreign security matters. Their uncontrollable desire to bring down Syrian President Bashir al-Assad led them to support radical Islamist groups like *al-Nusra* and, according to some news reports, ISIS, which puts Turkey in an awkward position with her NATO allies. Given Erdoğan's previous conflicting signals on other matters (i.e. Chinese missiles, Israel, desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and hesitation to join the NATO campaign in Libya) US leaders began to question Turkey's reliability as an ally. Moreover, Russia's military assistance to Syria now stands in the way of Erdoğan's regional goals. The downing of a Russian warplane by Turkish fighters in November 2015 has led to war of words followed by Russian economic sanctions on Turkish imports. Relations between the two countries continue to be tense as President Putin of Russia authorized deployment of 7000 Russian troops to a base in Armenia across from the Turkish border and stationed in Syria advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missiles and more aircraft with advanced fighting capabilities as well as more

naval ships. It can be concluded that numerous erroneous policies have resulted in problems with neighboring countries that will require many years of mending. And Erdoğan's personal ambition are squarely behind these failures. Unless he is checked by the AKP government, a similar incident like the Russian aircraft could very well may result in far worse outcome.

On the domestic front, the immediate political future of Turkey does not look promising either. Once a model for other countries for democratic development with a Muslim population, Turkey is rapidly sinking into political quagmire characterized by deep societal cleavages, intolerance, loss of judicial independence, loss of individual civil and political rights, and emergent despotic leadership of an individual who is skilled in political and economic patronage. However, given the nature of the scandals surrounding Erdoğan, his family, and many of his associates, it is questionable how long he could maintain control. So far he has managed too well but as Erdoğan faces increasing challenges from traditional secular parties coupled with mounting crisis with the Kurds and neighboring countries, the rank and file of AKP is likely to start looking for a safe next chapter for the party. What that next chapter be, remain intact or split up or with Erdoğan or not, only time will show. What is clear is that these are disturbing times for the Turkey and while the AKP can celebrate its election victory, those who care about Turkish democracy should remain deeply concerned.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Eldersveld, *Political Parties*; Michels, *Political Parties*; Schattschneider, *Party Government*; Yeşilada, "Relignment and Party Adaptation."
2. Eldersveld and Walton, *Political Parties*, 387–90.
3. AKP, *2002 Genel Seçimleri Seçim Beyannamesi*.
4. Kalaycıoğlu, "Justice and Development Party."
5. Kalaycıoğlu and Carkoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism*.
6. Yeşilada and Noordijk, "Religiosity and Political Values."
7. Akyuz and Boratav, "The Making of the Turkish Financial Crisis."
8. There is a vast literature on this topic. See, for example, Çarkoğlu, "The Nature"; Eligur, *The Mobilization of Political Islam*; Kalaycıoğlu, "Justice and Development Party"; Kubicek, "Grassroots Democratization"; Toprak, *Being Different in Turkey*; Yeşilada, "The Virtue Party"; and Yeşilada and Rubin, *Islamization of Turkey*.
9. Data retrieved from on-line databank at www.worldbank.org.
10. Barclays Capital, *Global Outlook*.
11. "Ergenekon Yargıtay'da," *Sözcü*, October 6, 2015, available at <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/ergenekon-yargitayda-951878/>, accessed December 21, 2015.

12. Kalaycıoğlu, *The Challenge of à la Turca Presidentialism*, 3.
13. For more on this concept, see Boyunsuz, "The AKP's Proposal," in this issue.
14. It is crucial to note that before and after the recent elections, Erdoğan made numerous suggestions that Turkey can only reach its potential as an economic and political power with a presidential system. He also made it quite clear that he will remain in charge of policy priorities. During the entire time, Prime Minister Davutoğlu deferred to President Erdoğan on key policy decisions and did not object to Erdoğan deciding the candidate list for AKP before the elections or the subsequent list of cabinet members. Erdoğan is the one who speaks on all policy matters and the government follows in his footsteps. He is also the one who meets other heads of governments often prior to Davutoğlu. For example, see "Erdoğan'dan başkanlık sistemi açıklaması," *Sözcü*, November 18, 2015, available at <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/erdogandan-baskanlik-sistemi-aciklamasi-989489/>, accessed December 21, 2015.
15. "Davutoğlu'ndan Erdoğan'a İlginç Başkanlık Sistemi Mesajı," *Aktif Haber*, December 17, 2015, available at <http://www.aktifhaber.com/davutoglundan-erdogana-ilginc-baskanlik-sistemi-mesaji-1275797h.htm>, accessed December 21, 2015.
16. Yeşilada and Noordijk, "Religiosity and Political Values in Turkey."
17. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*.
18. See EU Commission Staff Working Document, *Turkey 2015 Report*, available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_turkey.pdf, accessed December 17, 2015.

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