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## Turkey as a Source of Inspiration for the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges

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### I. Introduction

The most important lesson learned from the Arab Spring is the bankruptcy of the idea of authoritarian modernisation in the Arab world. *Tunisami* confirmed that in the long term, the stability of the Southern Neighborhood depends on simultaneous democratisation and modernisation of this region. The EU and Turkey are two players for whom an outcome of these processes has an enormous importance. At the same time, both sides, as external stake holders in the region, possess a huge potential to influence the course of events either positively or negatively.

Rather weak democratic traditions and a lack of success stories of modernisation among Arab countries mean that finding a source of inspiration for them is a crucial issue. Many commentators and politicians from Europe, Turkey and Arab countries alike think that Turkey could play this role. Turkey, ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP)- a post-Islamist political force-, is particularly admired by the mild Islamists but Arab Christians and liberal secularists have also declared their support for the Turkish model.<sup>1</sup> Turkey, however, also constitutes a source of inspiration

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<sup>1</sup> Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the moderate Tunisian Islamist party Nahda stated that “we are learning from the experience of Turkey, especially the peace that has been reached in the country between Islam and modernity; it is a true example. [...] The Turkish experience, the success of Turkey inspires the Arab world. Human rights, democratic freedoms and economic progress in Turkey – these are the biggest supports that Turkey gives to the Arab world,” he said. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar who took refuge in Istanbul after demonstrations on the Tahrir Square said that “Turkey is a good model for us, but with some changes. The community here is different

for the *ancien regime*. The Egyptian generals would like to follow the political model functioning in Turkey, which was until recently based on the army's constitutional predominance over the political parties and cautious tolerance of Islamists.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, Turkey, even before the Arab Spring, began to be perceived by the Arab societies as a source of inspiration. Turkey has become extremely popular since 2002, winning competition for the Arab hearts with other – regional and global – actors. For instance, according to Turkish think-tank TESEV's research "Orta Dogu'da Turkiye Algisi 2010", conducted in Autumn 2010 in several Arab states of the Middle East, 80% of Arab citizens express a positive attitude towards Turkey. Nearly the same number supports a greater influence of Turkey in the region. More than 66% of those questioned estimate that Turkey can serve as a model for Arab countries and is an example of a successful marriage between Islam and democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Turkey is a country which, though not without problems, modernised itself relatively quickly and effectively, and

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from the Egyptian community. For example you don't have shariah in your Constitution, and no one can put it there, but in Egypt we have shariah and it will remain in our constitution." Turkey was recognized several times as a source of inspiration by Syrian opposition groups including Christians and secularists. The richest Egyptian businessman Nassef Saffiris, being a Christian declared that his country has a choice between the Turkish model and Iranian one. He strongly supported the first option.

"Tunisian Islamist leader embraces Turkey, praises Erdogan", in: *Hurriyet Daily News* (3 March 2011). Available at:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=tunisian-islamist-leader-embraces-turkey-praises-erdogan-2011-03-03>;

"Shariah in Egypt is enough for us", Muslim Brotherhood leader says", in: *Hurriyet Daily News* (23 May 2011). Available at:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=8220shari8217a-law-in-egypt-is-enough-for-us8221-tells-a-muslim-brotherhood-leader-2011-05-23>.

<sup>2</sup> "Yeni Mısır'a '1982' model demokrasi", *Milliyet* (18 July 2011). Available at: <http://dunya.milliyet.com.tr>.

<sup>3</sup> Turkish Economy and Social Studies Foundation (Tesev), 2010: *Orta Dogu'da Turkiye Algisi 2010*. Available at:

[http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD\\_OBJC/PDF/DPT/OD/YYN/Ortadogu\\_arastirma\\_2010.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJC/PDF/DPT/OD/YYN/Ortadogu_arastirma_2010.pdf).

has widened its sphere of freedom. Consequently, Turkey as definitely the most democratic Muslim country within the Middle East before the Arab Spring and the strongest regional power (in terms of GDP, population, military, national income per capita) with an expanding economy and recently acquired influence in the Arab world, seems to be a likely candidate to becoming a model for Arab countries. However, it is crucial for Ankara to stay on track towards full democratisation and maintain predominance over the chasing peloton. According to Freedom House, Turkey is still a partly free state, but on the verge of becoming classified as a free country. The crossing of this Rubicon would surely increase Turkey's potential to serve as a source of inspiration. Turkey's serious interior problems make the full fledged democratisation of the country unlikely without support from outside. The process of integration with the EU might be the most important anchor for Turkish democracy development. Unfortunately, it is in a deep crisis at present. The relaunch of this process would definitely increase the chances of democratisation of the Arab world by improving cooperation between Brussels and Ankara in the region. Equally important, the reinforcement of Turkish democracy could result in the permanent inserting of democratisation at the top of the Turkish foreign policy's agenda, which will lead to a substantial increase in the convergence of foreign policy agendas between the EU and Turkey.

The second crucial precondition which Turkey has to fulfill, if it wants to play a major role in the democratisation of the Arab countries, is to take into consideration the specificity of every Arab country. Serious discrepancies in world views, between certain Arab societies and the Turkish one, have resulted in different potentials of following the Turkish path by the Arabs. Strict Turkish secularisation, which was often enforced in a Jacobin way, is therefore unacceptable for the Arab people. That is why it is important to estimate accurately which elements of the Turkish experience may serve as a source of inspiration for the Arab countries.

## II. Applicability of Turkey's experience: strong and weak points

Some experts reiterate that the Turkish experience is unique and difficult to apply elsewhere. In fact, Turkey in comparison with other Arab countries is peculiar; mainly because of its secularism and guarantees of equal rights for women - a legacy of Atatürk's firm, pro-West orientation. In Arab countries, only Tunisia has introduced similar secular reforms, although on a lesser scale.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there are deep divisions between Turks and – for instance - Saudis or Egyptians on this issue. The Saudi and Egyptian societies are much more conservative or even fundamentalist than the Turkish one, which generally opposes an Islamic state based on the Sharia law. In a study conducted in 2010 by the Pew Research Centre, almost 85% of Egyptian Muslims supported the ideas of legalisation of the death penalty for apostasy of Islam, and stoning for adultery. In another study carried out by the Gallup, around 65% of Egyptian Muslims declared that the Sharia must be the only source of legislation. By comparison, less than 10% of Turks supported this idea. It was symptomatic that the recent Erdoğan's speech in Cairo promoting a secular state met with some negative reactions among Egyptian Islamists.<sup>5</sup>

The unique feature of Turkey is the existence of a substantial pro-secular minority within its society, amounting to approximately 35% of the population. The strength of this pro-secular minority was clearly visible during the massive demonstrations of 2007, when millions of Turks protested in favour of separation between state and religion. The character of the Turkish Islamist movement also shows the specificity of the country: electoral democracy, strong position of the army and a

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<sup>4</sup> Habib Bourghiba, the father of independent Tunisia very clearly declared that Kemal Atatürk's reforms were a model for him.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Centre, Global Attitudes Project (2010, December 2): *Most Embrace a Role for Islam in Politics*. Available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2010/12/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Muslim-Report-FINAL-December-2-2010.pdf>.

system of values shared by society, resulted in the evolution of the main stream Turkish Islamists who have never used violence in politics. The apogee of this process is AKP, which has rejected the idea of a confessional state and only now tries to soften the strict rules of the division between the public sphere and religion. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the rise of AKP's Islamist predecessors in Turkey was a parallel process, with similar trends taking place in the Arab world and was influenced by the latter ones.

Nevertheless, the differences between Turks and Arabs concerning worldviews and a system of values should not be overestimated. The latter are not a homogenous group. Several researches have proved an existence of very considerable similarities between Lebanese Muslims, Tunisians and Turks with regard to the value systems. Also the differences between Turks, Moroccans and Syrians are not very large. Furthermore, Turkey's internal problems, which generally have a less severe character than those in other Middle Eastern states, are shared by other Arab countries. Turkey is a partly free state, where the military has a considerable impact on politics (although it has decreased substantially), women are still discriminated by a patriarchal society, national minorities (Kurds) are still waiting for a full respect of their rights, members of confessional and religious minorities (Alevi, Christians) feel as if they are second class citizens in comparison with a Sunni majority, religious fundamentalism remains a challenge, inequality of income is far greater than in Europe, and last but not least the unemployment rate among youth is high.

The similarities of challenges in Turkey and the Arab world mean that finding a remedy for them by Turkey would have a huge impact on the potential of Turkey's foreign policy on the Arab World. The Achilles heel of the Turkish democracy is the Kurdish issue, namely the armed conflict with the Kurdish guerilla, problems with integration of the Kurdish nationalists into the political life and the widening of Kurdish rights. Due to the huge Kurdish communities living in Iraq, Iran and Syria there is a

very close correlation between Turkey's full democratisation and its ability to have leverage on the Middle East. Turkey, by respecting its social and ethnic diversity, would become an exceptional case in the region, thereby making a substantial gain in the eyes of discriminated minorities in the Arab World. Furthermore, Turkey would also enforce its image of a credible mediator and honest broker between antagonistic ethnic and religious groups – a role which Ankara attempts to play.

This emphasis on minority and gender rights should not lead to resignation from secular ideas because the Turkish example shows that there is a correlation between democracy and secularism. However, in Arab countries the process of the separation of religion and the state has to be done in a more subtle manner – by reinforcing social pluralism. The stronger the diversified society, the greater the need for a neutral public sphere open to various groups. Hence, the most important measures to be taken are the improvement of the legal status of women and the respect for rights of national and religious minorities. In this context, AKP could become a particularly valued model to follow. For instance, for a post- Islamist party AKP has conducted surprisingly many – though still insufficient - reforms concerning gender equality. Kemalist, the strict-secular and authoritarian Republic of Turkey cannot be a model for other countries in the region. It is the Prime Minister, Recep Erdoğan, a faithful Muslim, and not Atatürk, who has won the hearts of many Arabs. This does not mean that Turkey cannot be an inspiration, actually quite the opposite. The sole example of deep democratic reforms resulting from the integration process with the EU can serve as a manual of transformation for other countries in the region. Simultaneously, the majority of those reforms might be accepted in Arab countries, especially those concerning minorities and women's rights or freedom of the press.

Particularly valuable for the Arabs is the Turkish experience of the economic transformation as a background of the democratisation and soft secularisation of political life. As Dietrich Jung rightly points out “the political transformation of Turkey was preceded by a fundamental transformation of its

economic sector. [...] In the recent past, Turkey developed a productive, innovative, and socially diverse entrepreneurial class with large segments not representing big business but local and regional business. [...] In short, Turkey has been able to develop a political economy that is the fundament for both his new regional foreign policy and its domestic process of democratic reforms”.<sup>6</sup> The main benefactors of the economic transformation were a new emerging socially conservative middle class, which constitutes a backbone of the AKP electorate base. In effect, as Vasil Nesri, an American political scientist underlines, wherever in the Arab world the middle class will become strong as in Turkey, it will re-emphasise the moral values of Islam, and downgrade its real or imagined prescriptions for politics and law.<sup>7</sup>

However, an argument often used to oppose Turkey’s role as a source of inspiration for the Arab world is the exceptional EU context of Turkish politics that strongly limits the applicability of the ‘Turkish model’.<sup>8</sup> Although the path of EU accession could not be followed by the Arab countries, it seems that this difference should not be overestimated. First, the transformation in Turkey also has “indigenous” roots. Secondly, the probability of accession has always been significantly smaller in the case of Turkey when compared to Central Europe. Thirdly, Arab countries are not interested in accession and expect less from the EU than Turkey. At the same time, the EU’s neighbourhood policy has become increasingly similar to the enlargement policy (political conditionality, integration with the EU in various dimensions in exchange for reforms). Most importantly, Arab countries, like earlier Turkey, generally need support from the EU as it would significantly facilitate their transformation.

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<sup>6</sup> Jung, Dietrich, 2011: “Unrest in the Arab World: Four Questions”, in: *Insight Turkey*, 13,3: 1-10: 9.

<sup>7</sup> “Dreaming of a Caliphate”, *The Economist* (6 August 2011). Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/21525400>.

<sup>8</sup> Jung, Dietrich, 2011, art.cit.: 8.

According to some experts, Turkey's basic shortcoming is a fact that it is not an Arab country. Ömer Taşpınar considers that "the Arab spring is likely to prove a mixed blessing for Turkey itself. [...] Thanks to democratic revolutions and the Arab Spring sweeping the region, this leadership vacuum will no longer be there in the near future. As it finds its footing as a more democratic regime, Egypt itself, rather than non-Arab Turkey, will emerge as the real model for the Middle East. In a world where the Arab world is much more united thanks to Al Jazeera, the success of a fellow Arab country will resonate much more widely in the Arab street than the success of a relatively distant, foreign and enigmatic Turkey."<sup>9</sup> However, first of all, Egypt's democratisation, due to many internal problems and constraints will most likely not be as smooth and fast a process as it seemed.

Moreover, even in the case of Egypt's successful democratisation Turkey will remain- though to lesser degree - attractive for Arabs because of its potential which is much larger than Egypt's, and particularly if the Turkish democracy keeps its "superiority" over Egypt. In relation to the asymmetry of potentials and qualities of democracies between Turkey and the Arab countries, it could become a serious challenge for Turkey's role as a source of inspiration for the Arab world if Ankara becomes corrupt by a "syndrome of the older brother" who "always" knows everything better. Thus, Turkey's success will depend on its ability to refrain from a patronising approach and build a genuine partnership with new Arab democracies. Considering the enormous rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt after the revolution and its close cooperation, it could be expected that Ankara will not be "infected" by a sin of arrogance. However, a challenge to Turkey's engagement in the Middle East and its attractiveness in the region could constitute in the medium term a change of government in Ankara. Indeed, Turkey ruled by

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<sup>9</sup> Taşpınar, Ömer (2011, April 18). Arab Spring a mixed blessing for Iran and Turkey. *Today Zaman*. Available at: <http://www.todayzaman.com/columnist-241301-arab-spring-a-mixed-blessing-for-iran-and-turkey.html>.



the opponents of the AKP would be less attractive for the Arabs and not so much interested in an engagement on the same scale in the Middle East as AKP is presently involved.

The difference between the Turkish and Arab democratic credentials in the historic perspective should also not be exaggerated. For instance, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the democratisation which took place in 1950, Turkey was less free than Egypt which was partly a constitutional monarchy. Furthermore, until Lebanon's civil war in the 70s, Lebanon too was considered to be more democratic than Turkey.<sup>10</sup> In fact, as a result of the EU reforms Turkey has recently significantly improved its ratings in terms of freedoms, in comparison to other Arab countries.<sup>11</sup>

In order to fully implement its potential for the Arab world Turkey must realise the famous quotation from Atatürk: 'peace at home, peace in the world' (Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh). Nowadays peace means liberal democracy. However, without Turkey's accession to the EU, a successful creation of liberal democracy seems less probable. The past decade has shown a strong link between the credibility of European perspective and the process of democratisation in Turkey. Obtaining the status of the official candidate to the EU by Turkey in 1999 led to "the quiet revolution" - the series of democratic reforms introduced at the beginning of 21st century. For the first time in the Turkish history, a military rule or a civil dictatorship seems to be highly unlikely.

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<sup>10</sup> Tanzimat, a period of reforms in the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a common experience for Turks and majority of Arabs. Tunisia de facto independent from Istanbul was the first Muslim country which passed the Western model constitution.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that between 1994-2001 Turkey's score in the Freedom in the World ranking was very similar to Jordan's, Morocco's and Kuwait's. Freedom House (2011)a. *Freedom in the World. Comparative and Historical Data*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=439>.

However, the crisis in negotiations with the EU which came after 2005 has led to a slow stalling of democratisation and even regress in some areas. Diminishing chances for accession weakened the pro-reform course of AKP and showed its limitations. As is the case with the entire country, the ruling party is also in need of change. Choosing an authoritarian way by AKP and the destruction of democracy is, so far, an unrealistic scenario but it is important to point out that this party is not a genuinely democratic one. AKP presented its authoritarian side by fighting with independent medias, tightening the anti-terrorist law and promoting “Scandinavian restrictions” on the liquor trade. As a result of those actions, Turkey shrunk in the recent Freedom House rankings of press freedom.<sup>12</sup>

Weakening the credibility of the EU-accession prospect led to the intensification of internal conflicts between AKP and the Kemalist left. The crisis of the negotiating process undermined the common platform for opposition and the ruling party, namely the platform of Europeanisation of the country. It is worth noting that the opposition supported almost every piece of the reformative legislation in the years 2002-2005. Unfortunately, after 2005 the problem of secularism became the main issue of political debate instead of a European one. This conflict diminishes Turkey’s potential of playing a model role in the Arab world. The Kemalist opposition sees the support by the AKP for moderate Arab Islamists as a threat to a secular character of the state, due to the possible increase of Islam’s role in the Turkish public sphere. Meanwhile, the Kemalists’ support for left-wing groups in Arab countries (who are in minority but not a marginal one) would be very desirable for a building of democracy in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Freedom House (2011)b. *Freedom of the Press*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16>.

<sup>13</sup> Balcer, Adam, 2011: “The Turkish Model”, *Policy Paper* (March), demosEUROPA, Center for European Strategy. Available at: [http://www.demoseuropa.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=797%3Aaturecki-model&catid=129%3A2011kom&Itemid=152&lang=en](http://www.demoseuropa.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=797%3Aaturecki-model&catid=129%3A2011kom&Itemid=152&lang=en).

### **III. Turkey and the EU in the Arab World: cooperation or rivalry?**

Ankara is not in a position to bring about a successful modernisation and democratisation of the Arab world by itself. The EU has a much greater economic influence and significantly greater potential than Turkey. Arabs themselves are well aware of this fact and believe that support from the European Union, as a partner for the changes taking place in their countries, is of key significance. On the other hand, no country has an equally strong position in this region at the social level as Turkey does. Furthermore, its increasing economic and political influence cannot be disregarded. In effect, the EU will find it difficult to successfully support the transformation of the Arab world without co-operating with Turkey. A general cohesion exists between the EU and Turkish positions on the future of the Middle East region. Both support the formation of two states as the solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, both are also against Iran's dominance in the Middle East and Teheran's possible possession of nuclear weapons. Both Ankara and Brussels support Iraq's territorial integrity, pro-Western forces in Lebanon and cooperation between the whole region and the West.

The distinguishing factor of Turkey from Europeans and Americans was not its support of autocracies in the Arab world. Although, the EU had in theory a stronger democratic agenda in the MENA than Turkey, who was still coping with an authoritarian legacy, it remained mostly on paper. Moreover, in the first part of the 2000s Turkey had a vocal democracy promotion agenda. Both Prime Minister Erdogan and then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul raised the issue of the necessity of reform in the Arab world. Authoritarian stability served as a convenient working arrangement with local regimes that all Western countries to one degree or another pursued. Turkey, as the European Union, selectively engaged with the Arab states and used double standards. The real difference between Turkey and European countries was their views on which of these regimes

could be trusted or not.<sup>14</sup> The divergences, though not fundamental, constituted nonetheless the most important source of tension between the EU and Turkey in Eurasia and Africa. As opposed to the EU, Turkey maintained good relations with Iran, Sudan, Hamas and Hezbollah and since 2009 has been confronting Israel. Ankara had also much more cordial relationship with Syria than the EU. The Arab Spring and the Turkish and European reactions towards it resulted in an enormous increase of convergence of interests between Turkey and the EU. Both placed democratisation at the centre of their agendas and took the same stance on crucial issues, such as Syria and the NATO missile early warning system that placed both on a 'collision course' with Tehran.

Theoretically, Turkey and the EU are presently united in their support for the transformation of the Arab world; however, Turkish-EU co-operation may face numerous challenges. There is a very strong correlation between four factors: complete democratisation of Turkey, progress in the transformation of the Arab world, the EU's internal situation (economic condition and attitude towards Islam) and the process of Turkish accession on the one hand and the European Neighbourhood Policy and EU member states' engagement in this region, on the other. These factors may stimulate each other positively (desirable trends in one field may have a positive impact on the other), but they may as well have a mutual negative impact.

Turkey will remain an attractive source of inspiration for Arabs, provided that it becomes a fully democratic country and continues to be the democratisation leader in this region. Arabs' expectations with regard to Turkey will grow as they themselves become more democratised. For example, Tunisia, which is most similar to Turkey but, unlike it, is ethnically homogenous, may

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<sup>14</sup> Alessandri, Emiliano; Walker, Joshua W. (2011, October 10). Turkey's Emergence as a Middle Eastern Stakeholder and What this Means for the West, *On Turkey, Analysis*. German Marshall Fund (GMF). Available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/turkey>.

become in the medium term more democratic than Turkey, if a positive scenario is realised. In effect, Muslim countries in the Mediterranean Basin may become engaged in a healthy rivalry regarding the degree of their democratisation, and Turkey may even draw inspiration from Arab countries. This would imply the emergence of a phenomenon similar to that which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the modernisation of the Ottoman Empire ‘proper’ and of the *de facto* independent Egypt and Tunisia were mutually stimulating. Secondly, Turkey’s adoption of the democratisation agenda, as a key element of its policy towards the Middle East, is creating a chance for such issues to be re-raised also at home, thus enabling civil society to pressure the government. A positive impact the transformation in the Arab world, and Turkey’s engagement in it, have on Turkey’s EU accession process could manifest itself in a change in the attitude towards its membership in Europe, owing to the increasing awareness of the role Turkey could play in a successful transformation of Arab countries. The improvement of the attitude towards Turkey’s EU membership among the EU member states, which was observed for the first time in several years in the Transatlantic Trends 2011 survey, is most likely an effect of the role Ankara played in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.<sup>15</sup> The attitude of the Arab people towards Turkish membership in the EU is another example of correlation between the above mentioned factors.

The majority of Arab people support Turkey’s accession to the EU and think that its impact on the Middle East would be positive. This opinion is shared by the Arab intellectual and political elites. The Arab League officially backed Turkey’s European bid. The League’s delegation even went to Brussels in order to lobby for Turkey’s membership. Journalists from Arab countries constituted the greatest group at the EU summit in 2005, during which a decision to commence talks with Ankara was taken. In Arab media the matter of Turkish membership became a litmus test of the

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<sup>15</sup> German Marshall Fund (GMF) (2011, July). *Transatlantic Trends 2011*. Available at: [http://www.gmfus.org/publications\\_/TT/TTS2011Toplines.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/publications_/TT/TTS2011Toplines.pdf).

EU's attitude towards Islam. As a result, a long term crisis in relations between Turkey and the EU (a freeze-up of accession talks) would surely have a negative impact on the EU's image in the Arab world, and as a consequence on the European ability to influence developments in this region. The attitude towards Turkey and the EU's ability to support the transformation of the Arab world are closely linked to the conditions existing within the EU. The lack of readiness to accept Turkey's accession among the European public results from their conviction of the failure of the Muslim integration in Europe, which despite some real problems, has definitely been presented overly pessimistically, and also of the hard economic situation. Economic problems pose the greatest challenge to Europe's ability to bring into effect a new agenda for the democratisation and modernisation in the Arab world (more money, more mobility, more market access). Consequently, it is difficult to imagine a major change in the attitude towards Turkey's accession and a successful engagement of the EU in the democratisation and modernisation of the Arab world without a change in the overly negative perception of Islam and Muslim immigrants, or improvement of the economic situation in Europe. On the other hand, a failure of Turkey's accession process and of transformations in Arab countries will adversely affect relations between Muslims and the rest of Europeans inside the EU.

Turkey's internal problems are serious, and therefore its democratisation would be significantly facilitated if the accession process regained credibility. Thus, if the accession process were reactivated, the EU would gain a powerful tool in the form of a democratisation agenda in Turkey's foreign policy and possible successes of some Arab countries, which would facilitate its efforts to persuade the Turkish government to continue the process of democratisation of their country. In the EU, there is the widespread opinion that in the future a more powerful and self-assertive Turkey would become less prone to pressure from Europe in the context of further reforms or coordination of foreign policy. But a full democratisation of Turkey resulting in the strengthening of Turkish civil society will lead to growing grassroots pressure on the Turkish government to support the

democratic transformation of its neighbourhood, and will permanently converge agendas of Turkey and the EU in the Arab world. Indeed, ups and downs of democratisation in Turkey and in the Turkish-European relations have also had an impact on the position of democratisation in the agenda of Turkish foreign policy. During a golden era of Turkey - EU relations (2002-2005), the government introduced unprecedented democratic reforms, and democratisation appeared for the first time in the history of Turkey in its foreign policy agenda. At that time Turkish representatives did not hesitate to criticise undemocratic regimes in the Arab region, a stance that won them the support of Arab people. However, after 2005 the Turkish rhetoric has shifted towards political realism, and has mostly concentrated on good relations with neighbours.

A big paradox is the definite increase in the convergence of the agendas and policies adopted by Turkey and the EU towards the Arab world, being an effect of the *Tunisami*, at a time when negotiations concerning Turkey's accession had actually come to a standstill.<sup>16</sup> Proposals emerging over the past few years, to separate issues related to EU-Turkish relations in the neighbourhood context from the accession process, miss the mark and fail to notice the essence of the problem. Even if Turkey accepts the privileged partnership, the two major barriers which very strongly impede EU-Turkey co-operation will not disappear, namely the unresolved Cypriot issue, which is very unlikely to be settled outside the accession context, and the intensifying rivalry between Turkey and France in the Mediterranean Basin, being an

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<sup>16</sup> The last chapter was opened in the middle of 2010. A definite majority of the chapters have been blocked by Cyprus, France or the EU itself. Turkey cannot close the chapters, as well. Only three chapters are still to be opened, the benchmarks of which will be too expensive for Turkey in political and economic terms, if no accession perspective is offered.

European Commission (2011, October 12). *Turkey 2011 Progress Report*.

Available at:

[http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2011/package/tr\\_rapport\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/tr_rapport_2011_en.pdf).

effect of the Arab Spring. It has been manifested most vividly in Libya. This rivalry may adversely affect the internal situation in Arab countries, thus impeding their democratisation and modernisation. Turkey and France have become the most influential states in the Mediterranean Basin; therefore, a 'reconciliation' between Turkey and France will be one of the major factors on which the success of the transformation of the Arab world will depend. This will be almost impossible however, if Nicolas Sarkozy remains President of France, because it is unlikely that he will be ever trusted in Turkey due to his strong opposition to Turkey's EU accession. A permanent freeze or break-off of Turkey's accession process will also not be painless. Turkish-EU relations are likely to deteriorate in the Arab world in such a case. Both parties will increasingly see one another as rivals and will lose the institutional framework for coordinating foreign policy, which has been provided by the accession process.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Turkey, owing to its democratisation, modernisation and increasing influence in the region, had already become a potential source of inspiration to Arabs prior to the Arab Spring. The recent developments only created a chance for Turkey to strengthen its influence significantly in the Arab world. The strengthening of Turkey's position in this region would imply an increase in its ability to influence the development of the situation in the Arab world and also in its attractiveness to Arabs. Ankara may provide tangible support to reforms in Arab countries by sharing its experience (expertise, consulting and advise), development of institutional relations with their state administration, political parties and civil societies, which would contribute to the their strengthening, and through financial aid and economic co-operation (investments, trade and construction contracts). Indeed, many Arab states are now in a difficult economic situation or are in need of reconstruction, while economic stabilisation is a vital precondition for successful modernisation and democratisation. The rapidly developing Turkish economy could become a driving



engine for some Arab states. Particularly important is Turkey's potential to impact on mainstream Islamic circles, whose influence is likely to grow significantly in the immediate future.<sup>17</sup>

Certain elements of the Turkish experience may serve as a source of inspiration for Arab countries. However, Turkey's attractiveness and potential strongly depend on creating a fully-fledged liberal democracy in Turkey itself. The realisation of this scenario would be boosted by the reactivation of Turkey's negotiation talks with the European Union. In consequence, despite opinions that the EU perspective lost relevance and importance for Turkey, the most important challenge to Turkey's capacity in acting as a source of inspiration for the Arab world is, in fact, a vague perspective of Turkey's integration with the EU.

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<sup>17</sup> The process of democratisation and modernisation of the Arab world could also be significantly facilitated by a possible liberalisation of Iran. Turkey, owing to its strong economic (its share in the Iranian trade balance reaches approximately 7%) and social bonds with Iran (almost 2 million Iranians visited Turkey last year), positive perception among Iranians and a numerous Turkic community (approximately 25% of Iran's population) may play an important positive role in this process.

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