

Scandal in Ankara

WOLFGANG STREECK

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The European Union has five Presidents: one for the Council, one for the Commission, one for the Parliament, one for the Central Bank, and one for the Court of Justice. (There are also any number of Vice Presidents; after all, we are talking about 27 member states.) Recently, two of the Presidents, those of the Commission and of the Council, went on a trip to see another President, the one-and-only-one of Turkey. From this resulted a scandal, one that is worth reflecting on at some length to continue to learn about that strange beast, the European Union, and its doings.

These days, when Presidents meet, pictures are taken, and this was no exception. Pictures, however, can take on a life of their own. What one saw was the Turkish supremo sitting on a chair, with the President of the Council, Charles Michel, a former Belgian Prime Minister, sitting on another chair right next to him, both grinning into the camera. To their left and right were sofas, two of them, opposing each other, one occupied by the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the other, facing her, by the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs. Hardly had the picture

been published when the arrangement was dubbed ‘Sofagate’ by the press, as every self-respecting scandal these days must have a label attached to it that ends in -gate.

What was the scandal? The answer was obvious: Erdoğan, the Turkish misogynist, had humiliated our other President on account of her being a woman. Von der Leyen should have had another chair, not a sofa, perhaps to the other side of Erdoğan, so the two European Presidents would have been framing the one Turkish President, while the Turkish Foreign Minister could have looked from his sofa at an empty sofa across the room. Members of the EU Parliament, having nothing else to do during the pandemic, demanded a debate, and the new Italian Prime Minister, Draghi, called Erdoğan a ‘dictator’, to the applause of all right-thinking left-liberal pro-Europeans. Tempers heated up even more when unofficial pictures emerged, who knows from where, that showed the three Presidents entering the salon to set up for their encounter: one saw Michel marching to the end of the room, throwing himself into one of the chairs, stretching his legs and grinning provocatively at von der Leyen, who first let out a gasp of consternation and then, with a resigned smile, sat down on the sofa to the left. (Not so long ago she, or whoever would have been in her place, might have asked Michel for a duel.)

This sparked a ‘discourse’, as it is nowadays called. While Michel let it be known that he was heartbroken and couldn’t sleep anymore, so ashamed was he after the incident, it turned out that the matter had a prehistory. Apparently European Presidents have separate staffs, and so there seem to have been two

separate advance visits to Turkey, preparing the ground for the Great Presidential Reunion. Also involved was the EU's ambassador to Turkey, a German diplomat (the EU has its own diplomatic service; again, there are 27 member countries). Von der Leyen's staff seems to have been allowed to inspect the dining room where the three Presidents would be served a good dinner after a good day's work. The staff discovered that the chairs on which Erdoğan and Michel would be seated were bigger than von der Leyen's chair, which may have reflected the fact that that she is not just a little smaller than the two other Presidents. In any case, her staff got the Turkish state to provide equally small chairs for all three of them, in the service of gender equity.

Nothing, however, is known about what the two advance delegations and the European ambassador did regarding the relative status of the two European Presidents. Maybe they were careful not touch on this sensitive matter and instead relied on a diplomatic handbook that the EU provides to non-EU countries in case they are interested. There it is said that the President of the Council is to be considered equal to a Head of State, whereas the President of the Commission is comparable to a Prime Minister. There is some logic to this as the Commission President is appointed by the Council, rather than the Council President by the Commission. That logic, of course, is not popular with the EU Parliament, which may explain both why the handbook is so little known and why the Parliament got so excited about the Sofagate incident.

So far so good. Still, the longer one thinks about this, the more bizarre the story becomes. First, where was the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (that's a title!), a Spaniard by the name of Josep Borrell? Should he not have been there too? In fact, he might have sat on von der Leyen's sofa, looking the Turkish Foreign Minister in the eye, as would have been the appropriate thing for him to do, and of course having his colleague look back into his? Those reading the papers may remember that Borrell had recently visited Russia, with no President in tow, against a background of growing tensions after Biden's ascent to the US presidency. The trip became a disaster as the EU and Germany had let it be known beforehand that they would not end their sanctions over Crimea and might even add more sanctions over Navalny. Having been publicly humiliated by his Russian counterpart, or so it was made to appear, Borrell seems to have been put in the cooler, for a while if not forever. So could it be that there had to be two European Presidents simply so the Turkish Foreign Minister didn't have to face an empty sofa (and von der Leyen had to fill what would otherwise have been a black hole)?

This seems far-fetched, although with the EU you cannot fetch from too far sometimes. After all, what needs to be explained here is not just why two Presidents made the trip to Ankara, but why any Presidents at all did so. (Does the High Representative etc. etc. not have a deputy?) Assuming that the dual trip was not just a diversion from the hardships of the Belgian lockdown, one might entertain the suspicion that the diplomatic overkill was to express regret over and ask forgiveness for the harsh words from the EU

when a few years ago, Prime Minister Erdoğan turned himself into President Erdoğan and, a short time later, into Dictator Erdoğan — in other words, that the visit was to mark the beginning of another wonderful friendship. One reason why the EU would find this desirable would be the important function Erdoğan has never ceased to perform for the EU's internal peace and quiet: enabling it, in short, to maintain a liberal immigration and asylum regime pleasing some voters without having to let it take effect, pleasing other voters.

This Erdoğan does by keeping millions of refugees bottled up in Turkey, mostly Syrians driven from their homes by a never-ending civil war prolonged by 'the West's' demand for a 'regime change' that it is unable to bring it about — a service for which he collects, one hears, roughly three billion euros per year. Should he cease to do so, hundreds of thousands Syrian and other refugees would call the bluff on European (i.e. German) largesse, forcing European governments and the EU either to face a revolt from the right, or take on the liberal left in a battle for realistic reform of an unrealistic, politically unsustainable legal regime that serves no other purpose than the signalling of virtue, inwards as well as outwards. With Erdoğan as a robust gatekeeper, appointed by Angela Merkel acting in 2016 as de facto president of the EU, the 'friendly face' of Europe (Merkel) can be saved without having to become more than that: a façade. Two Presidents, and maybe a little more cash, now that Erdoğan is short of it and Next Generation EU has learned how to make it out of nothing, are the least Europe can offer Erdoğan

for his assistance, as reassurance in a year in which his old ally, Angela Merkel, is supposedly going into retirement.

Without any sofa at all on that fateful day was Osman Kavala, a wealthy Turkish citizen who devotes his fortune to cultural, political and educational projects in his country. Kavala sees himself as a bridge-builder between Turkey and Western Europe, working with Turkish and European partners for democracy in his country and for peaceful relations with its European neighbors. Since October 2017 he has spent his time in solitary confinement, originally accused of having incited the Gezi Park demonstrations three years earlier. In 2019 he was finally tried, and in February 2020 was acquitted of all charges. As he was about to leave the court building he was arrested again, this time for alleged involvement in the so-called Gülen putsch of 2016. The judges who acquitted him are now themselves under investigation for supporting terrorism. In December 2020, four months before the two European Presidents' trip to Turkey, his second trial began. The prosecutors are demanding lifetime imprisonment for participating in the putsch and an additional 20 years for espionage. The previous acquittal was overturned and the case will be tried again. The European Court of Human Rights and several other European bodies, including the EU Parliament, have repeatedly called for Kavala's immediate release, to no avail. Indeed, Michel and von der Leyen's presidential counterpart has several times publicly pronounced Kavala guilty. And he is not the only one. As of July 2020, 58,409 were on trial and 132,954 under criminal investigation for links to the

Gülen movement; at least 8,500 were locked away for alleged ties to the PKK; dissenters have disappeared, and detainees are frequently tortured.

Questions: Might not the two Presidents have made their appearance in Erdoğan's living room conditional on Kavala's release? How could Sofagate have crowded out Kavalagate as the European public's scandal of the week? And why does 'Europe', as embodied by the EU, impose sanctions on Putin for Navalny while granting Erdoğan a visit from two Presidents at once in spite of Kavala?