

*A Turkish Perspective*

# Turkey and the West after the Failed Coup: Possible Scenarios

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**ABSTRACT** *Western powers are the main players that determine the national and international policies of Turkey, a NATO-member and a candidate country to the EU. The converse is also true, meaning that Turkey's domestic political developments have always had an influence over the country's relations with the West. The July 15 coup attempt is no exception in this regard. The botched coup is, without a doubt, a turning point in Turkey's political history. Therefore, the present article aims at conceptualizing the eventual consequences of the July 15 coup attempt for Turkish foreign policy.*

**F**oreign relations cannot be evaluated without understanding mutual interactions between states; therefore, it is impossible to discuss Turkey's foreign policy independently of other states' attitudes. Concordantly, one should stress that the Western states, especially those who are member of NATO and the European Union (EU), comprise the main axis that determines Turkey's national and international policies. In other words, Turkey-West relations are the key determinant of almost all of Turkey's policies. Thus, even as one analyzes Turkey's stance toward the Middle East, the Caucasus or Russia, or even when its own domestic politics are studied, the U.S. and the Eu-

ropean countries must also be referenced. In this regard, the July 15 coup attempt is no exception.

The coup attempt signifies a turning point in Turkey's social and political history. Almost every segment of the society, including non-governmental organizations and all of the political parties resisted the coup attempt; it was this resistance that prevented the coup. The attempt to overthrow the elected government by force of arms despite the People's will, however, has led to a polarization of Turkish society, as the attempt demonstrated the extent to which the system needs restructuring in order to prevent coups from occurring again. It has become

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obvious to many that such restructuring should have as its goal an equivalent to the models in place in states which enjoy more highly developed democratic systems.

Despite the growing cry for extensive, democracy-enhancing restructuring, the developed democratic countries – NATO and the EU countries in particular – have remained extremely aloof to the throes of democratization in Turkey in a timeframe spanning the pre- and post- failed coup periods. In recent years, it should be noted that almost every legislative regulation in Turkey has been negatively criticized by these countries, although these same regulations are in force in those countries. This approach of many years has increased levels of mistrust in Turkey against the West, and the perception has become prevalent that the aforementioned countries brush Turkey aside, despite Turkey's wish to be a respected player in the developed world. Indeed, the Western countries' attitudes became crystal-clear during

the coup attempt, and Turkey has had to face the fact that these countries are only interested in the geostrategic and geopolitical position of the country, and not in the quality of its democracy.

The importance of geopolitical and geostrategic variables is undeniable in regard to Turkey's foreign affairs. However, policies cannot be made by considering countries worthy of attention solely because of their geopolitical and geostrategic importance; if that were the case, it would probably be sufficient to look into Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria in order to understand Turkey's fate.

### **The Recent Past**

The beginning of the West's recent negative political positions adopted against Turkey dates back to the commencement of the Turkey-EU accession talks in October 2005. With the start of the membership negotiations, Turkey launched the most comprehensive reforms in its history, and accomplished a great deal of transformations during the years 2000-2008 in particular. However, the more Turkey approached the EU with reforms, the further Turkey has been pushed back by the EU. In time, Turkey has been demotivated by the EU's policy of casting out the country in spite of its efforts to close-up the gap; that policy considerably harmed Turkey's relations with the European countries. Indeed, Turkey has predicted that the EU plans to keep the country in limbo – not ratifying its member-



ship, but not completely letting it go either – thereby keeping Turkey as a kind of buffer between the “East” and the EU.

In fact, the EU’s externalizing a candidate country by implying that it is not “one of them” means, in a sense, to say that Turkey is “Eastern.” Indeed, the EU used the initiative policies that Turkey adopted at that time towards the Middle East and Africa to consolidate their arguments that Turkey’s approach marked a shift of axis towards the East. However, it is the EU’s policy to labor the claim that Turkey is not sufficiently westernized to become an EU member that has evaluated Turkey’s shift to the East as negative. In this context, the center right and far right currents are the ones to blame in Europe, particularly the governments of Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Angela Merkel in Ger-

many. From the year 2010 on, in particular, the intensity of such attitudes has peaked through such statements that Turkey cannot, will not, and should not, be an EU member; this was also the period of the rise of the “Arab Spring.”

Most of the NATO and the EU countries, along with Turkey, supported the Arab Spring at first, but later withdrew their support and promoted the platform of changing the rulers, not the regimes, in the Middle East. The strategic reason for the Western alliance to rapidly abandon Peoples’ Regimes scenarios is the probability that the coming to power of the People would be “anti-Western,” and that Russia might support such tendencies. The countries that are worried about losing their relative superiority in the Eastern Mediterranean to Russia have, in a way, taken the situation

Civilians standup against the coup plotters affiliated with FETÖ, who aimed to topple the democratic government in Turkey on the night of the July 15.

AA PHOTO / CEM ÖZDEL

into their hands, wishing to avoid creating a new opportunity for Russia after the EU's rapprochement with Ukraine.

The EU appears to remain undecided as to the kind of relation it should establish with Turkey; the country is extremely vital for the West *vs.* Russia rivalry which has replaced the traditional Britain *vs.* Russia competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. Put simply, two separate blocs have formed in the EU: those who maintain that the union should side with Turkey for the sake of the strategic dominion of the Western alliance, and those who argue that Turkey should be bypassed because it has long been a player for the "other" side. The strongest argument of the latter is the fact that Turkey cut diplomatic ties with Israel in 2010 and Egypt in 2013. A compounding factor in the argument is the fact that Turkey is still an EU candidate country. Turkey has stated clearly that if the country is asked to act like a member of the Western alliance, then the EU should not create problems for Turkey's EU membership; therefore, Turkey has demanded that its partnership with the Western alliance be guaranteed by sealing its membership in the EU.

While these arguments continue to play out, an entity called ISIS has emerged in Iraq, and particularly in Syria, amid uncertainty as to who exactly founded and supports it. ISIS has committed acts of terror in many different places outside its territory, and has specifically target-

ed the NATO and EU countries. As a matter of fact, ISIS terror activities in the U.S., France, Belgium and Turkey have produced a list of countries committed to fight against this organization. These countries, however, have not entered the fight in the way ISIS expected; ISIS presence has increased the influence of Iran over the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and in Syrian territory, and provided Russia with control over the Syrian issue. In the meantime, a counter-ISIS coalition has been formed, but no evidence has been observed that the coalition countries themselves have actively engaged in military fights against this group; a proxy war has taken place instead.

The outstanding actors of the proxy war have been ISIS and the People's Defense Units (YPG). The YPG is the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and a terrorist organization under Turkish law, as well as the laws of many Western countries. The war between ISIS and the YPG has not only legitimized the presence of Assad; it has turned the PYD into a regional actor on the grounds that the PYD simply is fighting against a radical Islamist terror organization. Thus, ISIS has paved the way for the PYD in political terms.

In the midst of this conflict, Turkey has suffered terrorist acts from both the PKK, which is organically linked to the PYD, and from ISIS synchronously. This situation has served to

test Turkey's position in the game since, together with its Western allies, Turkey had supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA) over the course of the "Arab Spring." The ISIS terror targeting Turkey was in the nature of an invitation for Turkey to intervene in Syria. On the other hand, the PKK terror, by creating an image of a Turkey that would interfere across the border with the PYD, reminded Turkey of the risk of "separation of the Kurds internally"; thus the PKK has played a role in dissuading Turkey from sending its military troops across the border. As the PKK attacks continued, it wasn't possible for Turkey to cooperate with the Syrian Kurds to fight ISIS; at the same time, Turkey also lost all chances of maneuvering in Syria due to the crisis with Russia following the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey in November 2015.

On one hand, the "Western" coalition has expected Turkey to engage in a ground fight against ISIS, and has defended the PKK on the other hand, saying that the PKK attacks against Turkey represent "a legitimate struggle." Thus, Turkey was indeed forced by the western coalition to make an extremely radical decision to the extent that Turkey should be involved in a ground fight against ISIS on behalf of the coalition, alone and at any cost; and to accomplish this, Turkey should sit at the table with the PKK and the PYD for a truce. In fact, such a decision invokes an expectation to implement the "Iraq" model in Turkey as well as in Syria, which would restrict the authority of the central

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government with Islamic reflexes. It also reflects the expectation of the "Western" coalition – or at least some of its members – to be able to by-pass Turkey in the Middle East and even in the Caucasus, and to create a free roaming space for their endeavors in the region.

In this scenario, Turkey will not become an EU member in a foreseeable future, and the issue of Syrian refugees will not be tied to the accession process; in addition, Turkey, having deployed its military in the region, will serve as a buffer against the Russian advance. All these endeavors will yield the "Western" world an opportunity to open up to the "East" with no cost to them. It should be acknowledged that not all NATO and EU member countries were involved in this scenario. At least, it is possible to say that the Pentagon and the CIA in the U.S. would not have such expectations. Nonetheless, this scenario, although we cannot be sure of where or how it has been decided, still appears to be in circulation today.

During his visit to Northern Syria, Brett McGurk (Obama's special representative), among others met with Polat Can, a high rank member of PKK and YPG Army Commander.

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Turkey has started to take steps that would make it difficult to carry such a scenario into effect and, as her first move, has resumed talks with Israel. Normalizing relations between Turkey and Israel implies new partnerships in the security designs of both countries. Historically, Turkey-Israel relations have not been considered within the scope of the Middle East policies of the two countries, but rather in the context of U.S.-Middle East relations. This time, however, it is not that easy to evaluate the Turkey-Israel normalization as an axis of the Turkey-Israel strategic cooperation, as both countries are experiencing vital problems with the U.S. administration. The U.S. continues to pressure Israel to recognize the State of Palestine, lift the Gaza blockade and stop building new settlements, and at the same time creates tension with Turkey on account of the PKK-YPG. Thereby, both countries are kept under pressure by the US – al-

though in different ways – and both countries, therefore, have inclined to develop their relations with Russia to balance out this pressure.

Turkey took the first steps toward normalization with Israel in 2013, but soon after faced a “judicial *coup d'état* attempt” to overthrow the government on December 17 and 25, 2013. Just by looking at the attempt, one can say that some were not pleased with the Israel-Turkey normalization. A rapprochement between Israel and Turkey would imply that the two issues which would be viewed as the ultimate success of the Barack Obama administration, i.e. the Palestinian cause and the proxy war against ISIS via the YPG, would become obsolete. In the meantime, the Turkey-Israel rapprochement disturbed the EU the most, as it negatively affected the on-going fruitless talks between Turkey and the EU regarding the Syrian refugees.

After normalizing relations with Israel, Turkey, as her second move, took steps to thaw the ice with Russia, which from the get-go has read the game and discerned the fact that “Europe” had a plan to contain it. As the normalization with Israel came at a time when Turkey and the EU were drifting apart, as shown by the lack of agreement over the Syrian refugee crisis, the EU perceived this rapprochement as a containment effort working against itself.

Turkey’s efforts aim to balance out its developing relations with Israel, and shape the future of Syria together with Russia because of the latter’s extensive influence in Syria, while weakening the Iranian influence and becoming a partner of the tacit agreement between the U.S. and Russia on Syria. The U.S. does not view such a policy negatively; however, it would require a policy change on the U.S.’ account. In other words, the U.S. would have to support Turkey, which it had previously pushed out of the Syrian debacle, and not the PKK-PYD, in the fight against ISIS, and therefore accept Turkey’s return to the game.

If the July 15 coup attempt had been successful, one could expect that the new government in Turkey would not force any policy change for the U.S. However, it should be said at this point that Turkey-Russia normalization would affect the European countries the most in terms of policy changes. Considering that the Russia-Turkey-Israel axis has been completed and that the Iraqi and the

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Syrian administrations in between have joined in the axis by means of U.S. and Russia inducements, it has become all the more difficult for the European countries to act boldly on their own in the “East.” It is not easy to predict what kind of a coup attempt might be in store next if Turkey takes the additional steps of normalizations with Egypt and then Armenia. Still, if some parties remain stubborn on the abovementioned scenario, there will possibly be a second coup attempt.

In this period of extremely fast developments, Russia’s use of its influence in Syria invites a change of phase from “proxy wars” to “covert interstate reconciliation,” with the acquiescence of U.S. cadres leaning towards cooperation. Despite the ebbs and flows from time to time, reconciliation between U.S.-Russia is obvious, at a time when Turkey has brought the FSA back into the game and entered Syrian territory.

**To make the political track of the Syrian opposition relevant once again, both the Syrians and the international community should find ways to persuade both sides that they should compromise to reach a political solution**

Some of the “western” countries resisting U.S.-Russia cooperation insist, however, on pursuing their “proxy war” strategy.

### **Near Future**

In August 2016, Turkey launched the operation Euphrates Shield in collaboration with the FSA in Syrian territory; in doing so, it acted in conformity with the “conciliation” scenario supported by the U.S. and Russia. There is no doubt that Turkey has intervened in Syria with two objectives: to remove ISIS from Turkish borders and to close down the corridor it holds in order to break off the connections among all territories under ISIS control. Hence, the other areas of the ISIS dominion are not of concern to Turkey. Turkey, in a sense, is pushing ISIS into a shape where the Assad regime and Russia could eliminate it more easily. Another objective of the Turkish military offensives in Syria is to prevent the PYD from reclaiming the territories left behind by ISIS. The crux of the matter for Turkey here is

the presence of armed groups affiliated with the PKK, which carries out terror attacks in Turkey, and not of the Kurds as her neighbors along the border. For this reason, Turkey’s goal is not to fight the PYD but to stop the PYD from creating territories for itself.

During his visit to Turkey in August 2016, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden warned the PYD (which the U.S. has supported from the very start) not to settle in the regions cleared by Turkey. This is, in fact, an announcement that the PYD is no longer a player in the game and has been replaced by Turkey. However, it should be acknowledged that although the U.S. is having difficulty forcing the PYD to retreat, and wishes to downgrade its involvement, it will not take its hands off the PYD completely. Indeed, the PYD would find another ally in an instant if it believed that it no longer has U.S. support. In this case, the best choice for the U.S. is to encourage the PYD to lay down its arms, to pressure the PKK to end terror or isolate it, and to reconcile with Turkey. In other words, these steps would be part of the U.S. recommendations.

Despite the logic of this plan, there may be some palpable problems in terms of implementation. The first is that the PKK and the PYD are not in as close cooperation as has been thought. If the PKK and the PYD have different motives, then it does not mean that the PYD will not attack Turkey or that the PKK will stop terror. Perhaps, while the PYD is being supported by the U.S., the PKK

is being backed by others who have been kept out of the Syrian issue by the U.S., who wish to join the game or wish to directly push the U.S. to the foreground while they remain comfortably backstage. If this is the case, then the PYD's disarmament will not necessarily guarantee the end of the PKK terror.

But then again, the PYD seems more apt to fight rather than to reconcile in the historic choice offered to them. One of the reasons for this choice would be to expose Turkey as unsuccessful in the fight against ISIS, in spite of U.S. support. The PYD may spin the tale that Turkey will not fully pressure ISIS, as a fellow Islamic government, but will instead target secular Kurds under the guise of "fighting against ISIS." In such a scenario, the PYD attacks Turkish military units in Syria and harms their fight against ISIS just to show the U.S. that choosing Turkey over the PYD was a mistake, and then argues that Turkey, in fact, is not fighting against ISIS. In doing so, the PYD would convince the hawkish cadres of the U.S. who are in favor of bypassing Turkey to urge a change of policy. In this scenario, Turkey could remain stuck in the region for years, continuing to fight against ISIS and the PYD, without being a decisive player or allowing anyone else to be one either. Hence, the war continues without any winners.

Another reason for the PYD to resist and adopt an anti-Turkey position would be that the organization may gain Europe's support after losing

that of the U.S. That means, the PYD offers some European countries the possibility to achieve what they had wished to achieve at the beginning without Turkey's involvement in Syria, but could still attain after Turkey's involvement in Syria. Turkey, in the face of such a possibility, does not withdraw but remains in the region for years, many people die, but again nobody can succeed in their own plans. Who knows what the new U.S. administration may say about the scenario with no game setter, but clearly, Russia objects to it. Thus, Russia will compel either the current or the prospective U.S. administration to make plans over winning Turkey back.

For the U.S., to make plans through the PYD instead of Turkey is meaningless in terms of regional balances. The reason is that Turkey absolutely does not pursue a policy that would harm improving relations with the U.S.; in fact, the ongoing tension between Ankara and Washington stems from the fact that the U.S. supports Turkey's enemies. In this case, it does not make sense to explain the U.S.'s attitude towards Turkey, only through the PYD problem.

There must be some other reasons than the U.S.-PYD cooperation behind the U.S.' ambivalent, often changing and inconsistent policies towards Turkey. Although there is not sufficient data in hand, the real reason for the U.S.' inconsistency towards Turkey may be the promises it has made to influential European states. Let us not forget that the Ukraine crisis significantly harmed

Elmar Brok, the current Chairman of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, met with the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on August 25, 2016. This was the first high rank official visit from the EU after the coup attempt.

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Russia-Germany relations, while the U.S. was not at all affected. Again, not the U.S., but Germany has been most affected by the BREXIT, the United Kingdom's decision to exit from the EU following the referendum held in June 2016.

As a matter of fact, the rapid developments in recent years have consequently set an obstacle before the strong EU countries: the obstacle is Russia and the countries Russia lends a hand to. The U.S. has a chance to comfortably overcome this obstacle together with Russia or another player, but the European countries need "other" partners to do so. The impasse Europe is facing is that any possible partner demands EU membership. Perhaps for this reason, the European countries support local entities which have no chance of or claim for EU accession. The U.S. con-

tinuously reminds Europe that its main partner is the U.S. and that the issue to crown their partnership is the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

### **Two Probable Outcomes: The Best- and Worst-Case Scenarios**

For the near future, many scenarios may be developed. However, two extremes are, perhaps, the most controversial, one of which is the worst-case scenario. In the worst-case scenario, Turkey will have to remain in Syria and fight for a long time against ISIS and the PYD synchronously, and the world public opinion will accuse Turkey of killing Kurds. Thus, ISIS cannot be weakened; rather, ISIS will increase its acts of terror in the West. In the meantime, the Assad regime loses strength and Russia will have to

intervene more extensively in Syria. If Turkey fails to do what is expected of it and if Iran still wishes to be involved in the situation, Russia will have to increase its influence in Syria. More Russian intervention in Syria will create a great deal of troubles for the Russian economy. The biggest danger waiting for Russia with a slogging economy evolves as the beginning of disintegration in Russia's own turf.

Russia, being in dire straits in this scenario, may be expected to open its doors to Europe. In the meantime, however, the U.S. presidential elections of November 2016 will have been completed, and Russia together with the new U.S. administration carries other plans into effect to lower Europe's expectations. The Russia-Europe rapprochement means a delay in the Europe-U.S. alliance. Besides, nobody can predict the kinds of wars likely to take place in the Russian territory in case of Russia's disintegration, or the extent to which China would then become an influential actor in that frame.

In the worst-case scenario, ethnic and/or religious groups in many countries – Syria and Iraq in particular – continue to gain strength and it will be impossible to talk about a definable system for a long time. In the meantime, if a greater danger than the July 15 coup attempt does not befall Turkey, the Turkish military will definitely not pull out of the region. Therefore, according to the worst-case scenario, chaos will continue, there will be no game setter; and Turkey survives as a country which can-

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not impose its own will yet successfully ruins the plans made by major powers. Turkey is seriously harmed in the worst-case scenario, Russia weakens, Iran and Saudi Arabia, perhaps, lose strength – at least as much as Russia does. The U.S., however, does not lose anything, but some of the countries in Europe absolutely become real losers.

Many European countries still engage in fierce competition with one another via some local powers in order to gain turf for themselves. However, since the system will come to a halt in the worst-case scenario, they may take over a few castles but will never go beyond the fortresses. But of course, rising nationalism in Europe carries racist parties into power, Islamophobia transforms into animosity for all, and considering that the EU summits are held in warships today, the future prospects are quite dark. Therefore, plans to divide up Syria, Iraq and perhaps Turkey, and to change the maps again may not materialize. Let us remember that such large-scale changes require World Wars. If the course of events

takes place in that direction, then it would be better to say that the one who starts the war always becomes one of the losers of the war.

The best-case scenario may be launched by gradually increasing U.S. influence over the PYD. The PYD becomes a party in the fight against ISIS instead of taking on Turkey; the effect of the PKK, isolated in the meantime, may be reduced. Hence, Turkey coming out of the spiral of terror-and-coup safe and sound may return to her “zero problems with neighbors” politics again. Then, a unitary structure based on pluralist representation is re-constructed in Syria; Russia and the U.S. step aside after securing their spheres of influence; and the guarantorship of the stability in Iraq and Syria is left to the state of the Turkey-Israel-Iran equilibrium.

Concurrently, the EU decides where and how its future resides. In fact, such a decision means that the EU should make up her mind about Turkey. An EU ratifying Turkey’s accession, despite some cost, may have more vital concerns than grappling with “Burkini;” this would not be something negative however. Because if there is going to be an EU that wishes to weigh more in the system, then it should become a player in real global problems and a partner for their solution. Turkey tenders the EU her solution partnership for

problems. But of course, it should be presumed that the EU will one day sign the EU-U.S. TTIP agreement, as it did with Canada in the case of CETA, signed in October 2016.

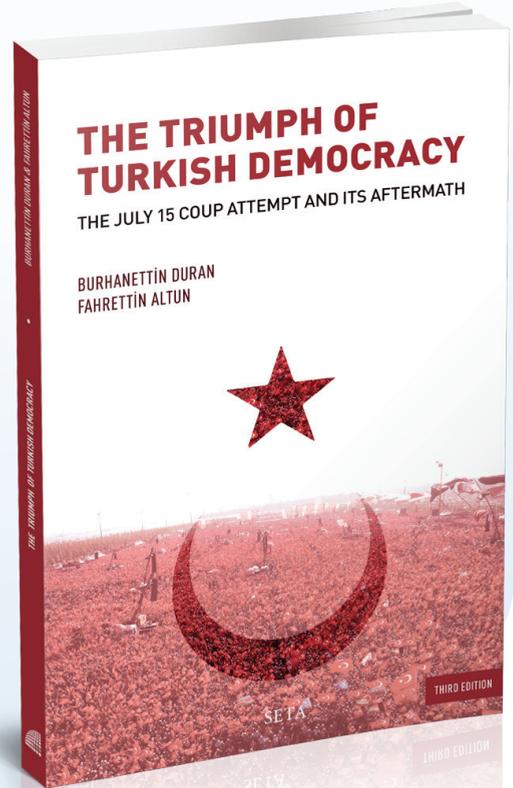
If the Transatlantic market is not united through such an agreement, and does not include Turkey, there will, undoubtedly, be “more Syrias.” Thus, the EU-U.S. rapprochement may include Turkey, all of Israel and Egypt, parts of Iraq and Syria, and may regenerate one end of the balance of power. That means leaving a part of Central Asia and the Middle East to Russia. Russia (in control of the North) and the U.S. (in control of the South and the West) can only then cope with China. The best-case scenario may not be reasonable for many. However, let us not forget that the most stable systems emerge when powers are defined and balanced. It is possible to predict that people will suffer in the best-case scenario, too. However, more people die when mighty countries flex their muscles against each other, than when they agree on balancing their powers.

Needless to say, Turkey strives for bringing the best-case scenario into action. If there are those who still cannot rid themselves of their doubts about Turkey today, they had better consider that the scenario disrupted by Turkey is the “worst-case scenario.” ■

## The Triumph of Turkish Democracy: The July 15 Coup Attempt And Its Aftermath

August 2016 | Fahrettin Altun, Burhanettin Duran

*The aim of this book is to overcome the prejudice and the misunderstanding against Turkey by analysing the events that took place on that night and the developments that followed.*



## Democracy Watch: Social Perception of 15 July Coup Attempt

September 2016 | Nebi Miş, Serdar Güleler,  
İpek Coşkun, Hazal Duran, M. Erkut Ayvaz

*This book presents a comprehensive analysis of the results of the fieldwork by taking into account the main motivations of the people and their perception of the 15th July coup attempt.*

