The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has abandoned his threat to dismiss 10 western Ambassadors due to their joint statement in supporting the imprisoned civil society leader and philanthropist Osman Kavala. The decision came after the United States and several other interested countries issued identical declarations about their compliance with the UN convention, which requires diplomats not to interfere in the internal affairs of the host country.

This, he says, is the official point of view of the general public. The fact of the matter is that the President held a multi-hour cabinet meeting in which his ministers warned him of serious economic dangers in escalating tensions with close allies and trade partners of Turkey. But Erdogan would not have been a descendant of Ottoman Sultans had he not victoriously announced on television that 10 Ambassadors have learned their lesson and “will be more careful now.” A new statement from the West “shows that they have taken a step back from slandering our country,” Erdogan said. In connection with this the lira quickly recovered from a historic low and traded almost at half a percent higher in relation to the dollar against the background of Turkey and the West having moved away from the brink of the most serious diplomatic crisis in the 19-year rule of the heir to the Ottoman sultans.

The diplomatic confrontation began when 10 embassies, including those of Germany and France, published an unusual statement in which they called for a “fair and prompt” resolution of the court case against the imprisoned
The ambassadors said bluntly that the Kavala case “casts a shadow on respect for democracy, the rule of law and transparency in the Turkish judicial system.” Nonetheless, analysts have noted that several European powers, including NATO member Great Britain, have refrained from joining the West’s calls to free Kavala. The Turkish political analyst, Soner Kagaptay, considers that, “there is a noticeable absence by Great Britain, Spain and Italy, which speaks to the fact that subgroups have appeared within the western family of nations capable of avoiding confrontation with Ankara.”

Erdogan’s rule in the post of Prime Minister and President marks the beginning of a series of crises followed by a rapprochement with the West. The Turkish leader spent a large part of last year attempting to improve relations with rivals from the Arab world and long-time European competitors such as Greece. But analysts said Erdogan was frustrated by attempts to win over US President Joe Biden, an outspoken critic of Ankara’s rights, who refused to meet in person on the sidelines of a UN summit last month.

Erdogan seemingly changed course last month, having threatened to start a new military campaign in Syria, and then orchestrating changes in the central bank which led to the lira quickly falling to a record low. Turkey’s financial troubles have been accompanied by an unusual surge of discontent from the country’s business community. The main leader of the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, blamed Erdogan for attempting to create a kind of artificial diplomatic crisis which he could then present as an economic problem for Turkey in the upcoming general elections of June 2023. It was then followed by his statement that he ordered the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to declare persona non grata status to the Ambassadors of 10 countries, namely USA, Canada, Germany, France, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and New Zealand. The reason for this was a joint statement made by the Ambassadors on 18 October in which they proposed for Turkey to free Osman Kavala, the famous philanthropist and businessman.

It is quite understandable that no ambassador would have come up with such an initiative without the instruction of the authorities of his country. Therefore, before agreeing to such joint actions, it was necessary to carry out coordination between the various capitals. Among some countries of the EU, NATO and the Western Bloc, there were absentees which would suggest that several capitals did not agree with the initiative and decided not to make Turkey an enemy unnecessarily. Both the content and the method of the ambassadors’ initiative were contrary to established practice. It is expected that the resident-Ambassador does not interfere with the domestic affairs and justice process of their host country. First, according to widespread practice, a diplomatic demarche is carried out in a host country only if it is a positive signal for that host country. If it is a negative message, the demarche should be implemented in the capital of the sending country, and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs invites the foreign Ambassador to the Ministry and publishes a statement. This safeguards the Ambassador from dismissal in the host country. Thus it is assumed that these 10 countries chose the wrong capital for publication of such a statement.

Secondly, even if the Ambassador was instructed to make such a statement, the diplomatic niceties require that they do this individually, by visiting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the host country and politely expressing the feelings of the sending country on the matter in question. The joint action will provoke and possibly harm the host country. This is precisely what occurred in Ankara with the statement by these 10 foreign Ambassadors. But Erdogan’s response was not proportionate to the Ambassadors’ initiative. He likely did not grasp that announcing an Ambassador as an unwanted person is the last step before the declaration of war. Declaring the Ambassadors of 10 countries as unwanted people, including the ambassador of a superpower such as the USA, many NATO allies along with great trading partners such as Germany, will likely remain a unique case in the annals of diplomatic relations and by no means will bring any points to the descendant of Ottoman Sultans.

In order to overcome the crisis, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department have agreed to publish a statement saying that Washington “maintains compliance” with article 41 of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations. The State Department made the promised statement on October 25, however this was no more than a confirmation of the facts since it said that the USA will continue to comply with the convention as it has done so in the past. In the Turkish version of the text it stated a grammatically incorrect phrase saying that the USA “confirms compliance” with article 41. Even if the two texts do not match, this constructive ambiguity saved the day.
Erdogan backed up saying that, “our goal is never to create crises” following a cabinet meeting with ministers on the day after the US statement. “This is done for the protection of rights, laws, honor and sovereignty of our country.” It is likely that by realizing the harmful consequences, he considered it necessary to view this attitude of the State Department as an alleged step back by the United States. His conciliatory tone presumes that he now understands the various consequences if Ambassadors are to be declared as personae non grata.

Furthermore, Erdogan is also prepared for the G20 meeting in Rome and the UN Climate Summit in Glasgow. He had a long list of questions which he was supposed to discuss with the US President Joe Biden, and possibly, he refrained from casting a shadow over these important meetings. The meeting finally took place in Rome and negotiations with the US President, Joe Biden, who stated that the likelihood of Congress or the Senate approving the Turkish request to purchase American-made F-16 combat aircraft, remains at “fifty-fifty.” However, he promised to do “everything possible” to ensure this purchase takes place. It bears reminding that Turkey was excluded from the US program to purchase F-35 combat aircraft while Turkish Ministry of Defense officials were sanctioned after the country purchased Russian-made S-400 anti-missile systems. The US claims that Russian missiles pose a threat to the F-35 and strongly opposes their use within the NATO alliance.

What is lost in this turbulent atmosphere is the fate of Kavala. He was acquitted by Turkish courts after he had been blamed for organizing and financing protests in Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 but has remained under guard for more than four years. Last year the European Court of Human Rights obliged Turkey to gradually release him. The Turkish Government up until now has not stated that it will not fulfill the ECHR’s verdict, yet Kavala is still being held in custody due to the indictment that has been going on for over a year. The essence of the Ambassador’s démarche was for the release of Kavala. Turkey not only recognized the jurisdiction of the ECHR, but also adopted a separate law, which provides that in cases where an international convention contains a provision that is contrary to Turkish law, the provisions of the international convention will prevail. In the end, 10 countries have laid out what they have in mind and it does not seem like they have backed down. Meanwhile Turkey remains rebellious and Kavala continues to serve his sentence without ever being convicted.

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