



## CATS Network Roundup

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey



Sinem Adar



Florian Richter

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the CATS Network Roundup of news, developments, and assessments concerning relevant issues about Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy.

**The arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu marks a new and dangerous chapter in Turkey's authoritarian drift.** But this time the outcome may not be in the ruling bloc's favour, argues Sinem Adar in our current issue. **With its legitimacy waning and internal fractures, the regime's once firm grip is loosening.** Meanwhile, the Republican People's Party (CHP) is finding its voice – not just by echoing public frustration, but by actively channelling it.

**Hürcan Aslı Aksoy explains why Europe's response remains conspicuously muted,** and how strategic interests – from migration management to NATO cooperation – continue to overshadow core values such as democracy and the rule of law.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at [cats@swp-berlin.org](mailto:cats@swp-berlin.org).

### On the Spot



picture alliance / REUTERS | Dylan Martinezian

**Turkey took another leap forward on its path to authoritarianism on 19 March with the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu,** Istanbul's charismatic mayor and one of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most credible rivals. This development echoes earlier inflection points in the country's democratic backsliding, such as the violent and polarising response of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations, the political turbulence surrounding the June 2015 general elections, and the sweeping purges and consolidation of executive power after the failed 2016 coup attempt. The legal offensive against İmamoğlu and more than 100 others – including municipal co-workers, advisors, and fellow CHP mayors such as Resul Emrah Şahan – has jolted the political landscape. **Yet, unlike in previous instances, the consequences this time may not work in the ruling bloc's favour.**

Despite President Erdoğan's extended mandate through 2028 and the ruling alliance's tight control over key state institutions, **signs of systemic fragility are increasingly evident. There is a constant push for a new constitution to entrench his executive model,** while the presidency exercises overwhelming influence over both the judiciary and the legislature. The pro-government bloc controls roughly 90 per cent of the media and continues to engage in clientelist economic practices, although with decreasing effectiveness.

**Nevertheless, the regime's popular legitimacy is waning.** Since peaking in 2011, the AKP's vote share – in absolute numbers – has continually declined. **The ruling alliance now finds itself forced to seek new partners to maintain electoral viability.** Efforts to fracture the opposition have yielded mixed results: The AKP lost control of Istanbul to the CHP in 2019 and, more recently, relinquished its position as the largest party in the 2024 local elections. Simultaneously, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) has retained its base in the country's south-east, and cooperation between the CHP and DEM Party in recent electoral cycles has proven tactically effective.

**Moreover, the regime has struggled to consolidate its governance model.** Although rhetoric about reform has been a fixture in Ankara since 2020, substantive follow-through has been limited. After the 2023 general elections, pro-government commentators heralded Erdoğan's new cabinet as one of "restoration", underscored by a pivot towards orthodox economic policy, a reinvigorated Foreign Ministry, and a reshuffle within the Interior Ministry. However, these adjustments have been piecemeal and marked by internal contradictions. **Competing personal and factional interests within the regime have made it nearly impossible to formulate coherent and unified policies, further undermining stability.**

**In the wake of İmamoğlu's arrest, the CHP has taken a more assertive political stance,** not only aligning itself with public discontent but actively mobilising it. The party's choice to frame the ruling alliance as an illegitimate "junta" reflects a calculated effort to delegitimise the regime's claim on hegemony. The CHP holds demonstrations every weekend in various cities and every Wednesday in a different district of Istanbul. **These protests systematically shed light on economic woes, judicial politicisation, and the lack of prospects for the future, especially among the youth.**

**The CHP's renewed position exacerbates the ruling alliance's ongoing struggle for stability.** Firstly, Ankara's ability to spin the narrative appears weakened. Pro-government journalists warn that the regime's strategy to portray the İmamoğlu case as one of corruption may not succeed, and by the time a court decision finds İmamoğlu guilty, the regime's moral high ground could be long gone. Secondly, disagreements are arising within the ruling alliance over how best to contain the fallout. Thirdly, the economic and political costs incurred by increased repression – including the doubts raised by İmamoğlu's arrest concerning rapprochement with Abdullah Öcalan, as well as foreign policy challenges, particularly in Syria – narrow the ruling alliance's space for manoeuvre further.

One of the placards at the CHP demonstration on 19 April declared the CHP as the "voice of the future". Whether this sentiment will resonate beyond core opposition circles – and reach those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo – remains uncertain. What is clearer, however, is that **Turkey's political trajectory will be volatile, with instability now being a defining feature of the system rather than a passing phase.**

*(Sinem Adar)*

### Three Questions for...



*[Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#) is head of the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. She works on Turkey's domestic politics and foreign and security policy in the Middle East and in Africa as well as Turkey-EU relations.*

#### **Why has the EU remained cautious in its response to Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest, despite concerns about the rule of law in Turkey?**

As Turkey slides into full-blown authoritarianism, the EU remains reluctant to respond to anti-democratic developments and the erosion of the rule of law in Turkey. This has been the case since the 2015 EU-Turkey refugee deal, which has made the bilateral relationship increasingly transactional. There is a clear reason for Europe's diplomatic silence: Turkey's strategic value for the future of European security, especially in the context of the erosion of confidence in the US security umbrella and the war in Ukraine.

**The outgoing German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, said that the arrest of such a central opposition politician is "depressing for democracy in Turkey, but certainly also depressing for relations between Europe and Turkey". But Germany's likely next chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has remained silent. What is the motivation behind this?**

The coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD clearly states that Turkey is an indispensable strategic partner because of its important role in managing migration and security as well as its role in the conflicts in the Middle East. Ankara has a key role to play in shaping the future of Syria and also for Ukraine. The coalition agreement also mentions the importance of improving democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, but it does not explain how this should unfold. Given Turkey's significant role in NATO and its geostrategic location, I think that under the new German government, Germany-Turkey relations will continue to be pragmatic, yet cooperative.

#### **What options remain for the EU and Germany in cooperation with Turkey?**

Neither Brussels nor Berlin has much political leverage over Ankara. But there are two options to turn cooperation into Europe's advantage. First, the EU – and Germany in particular – remains Turkey's most important economic partner. The EU is Turkey's largest trading partner, with 41 per cent of Turkish exports going to the EU. This pushes Turkey to be pragmatic and cautious towards Europe. Second, Turkey's burgeoning defence industry is embedded in the European defence industrial ecosystem, which requires Ankara to cooperate closely. The EU therefore needs to clarify its strategic priorities as it resumes diplomatic relations. In doing so, the EU should not reward Turkey's authoritarian style of governance and draw red lines around European principles and norms.

*Interview by [Florian Richter](#)*

### Recommendations

In his latest SWP-Aktuell (in German), [Yaşar Aydın](#) analyses the reasons behind the recent crackdown on the opposition in Turkey and its potential consequences. He outlines three possible scenarios for the country's political trajectory and discusses the courses of action Germany could take. Aydın argues that a full-scale autocriticism of Turkey can only be prevented if the opposition's resistance is provided with broad and sustained popular support.

The recently published SWP Point of View by [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Salim Çevik](#) highlights Turkey's deepening authoritarianism under President Erdoğan. It focuses on legal action against Istanbul's opposition mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, marking a shift towards targeting key challengers. The authors frame this as part of Erdoğan's broader strategy to silence dissent and erode democratic norms.

Although authoritarianism appears to be on the rise, recent pro-democracy mass protests across Europe tell a more complex and nuanced story. In *New Atlanticist* – a blog series by CATS Network partner the Atlantic Council – [Daniel Fried](#) highlights how citizens in Hungary, Serbia, Turkey, and Georgia are pushing back, challenging the narrative of inexorable democratic decline.

[Hürcan Aslı Aksoy's](#) latest article, which was published in the Atlantic Council's *TURKEYSource*, examines how Germany's incoming government is likely to navigate its relationship with Turkey. Emphasising a pragmatic approach, the article outlines the expected priorities of German foreign policy in balancing values and strategic imperatives, particularly in relation to Turkey's role in NATO and the EU.

This SWP Research Paper by [Günter Seufert and Sinem Adar](#) assesses Turkey's presidential system two and a half years after its introduction, highlighting its failure to deliver on its promises, resulting in weakened institutions, economic woes, and authoritarian practices.

The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at SWP in Berlin is currently offering fellowships (6–12 months, starting in September 2025 at the earliest) for researchers, think tank members, and practitioners working on Turkey-related issues. We look forward to your application, which should be received by 12 May 2025 at the latest! You will find more details [here](#).

Kind regards,

The CATS Team

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