

CATS Network Roundup

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey



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Dear Readers,

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

President Recep Tayyip **Erdoğan** has declared 2025 Turkey's "Year of the Family" while portraying the LGBT movement as a threat to traditional values. At the heart of the initiative is Turkey's demographic transition.

In this issue, we explore the motivations behind this initiative, its impact on women, youth and marginalised communities, and how similar right-wing movements around the world are using family policy as a tool of political control.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



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In his address to the nation on 6 January, **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that 2025 would be the "Year of the Family" in Turkey**. Erdoğan framed this initiative as a response to what he called "the gender-neutralisation policies encouraged by global axes of evil, which are known by everyone", and characterised the "LGBT" movement as a "serious threat to the existence of the family today".

This declaration reflects a broader trend in Erdoğan's governance, in which family policy is increasingly intertwined with concerns about the survival of the regime. Since the 2013 Gezi protests, his administration has positioned LGBTI+ rights within a geopolitical framework, treating them as part of a wider cultural and ideological struggle. Government-sponsored mobilisation against queer individuals is usually treated as a culture war between religious/conservative and secular/liberal values, and by extension as an electoral tactic of polarisation. This exclusive focus, however, neglects the international and political-economic dimensions of Erdoğan's family policy.

The Turkish Year of the Family 2025 follows the UN celebration of the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family (IYOF) in 2024. **Turkey has been an enthusiastic participant in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) on international family policy.** It counts among the 12 states that responded to UNDESA's 2022 Note Verbale requesting information on family policy as well as the ways and means in which IYOF would be observed.

In its response, Turkey enumerates its good practices regarding the reconciliation of work and family life, its policies to improve the digital literacy of the elderly, to facilitate the participation of citizens with disabilities in social life and to protect newborns and young children, among other social services. These priorities were formalised in **Turkey's 12th Development Plan (2024–2028), which explicitly aims to protect the institution of the family – defined as a union between a woman and a man – against "harmful tendencies"**. Accordingly, the Vision Document and the Action Plan on the Protection and Strengthening of the Family (2024–2028) reiterates the best practices submitted to UNDESA concerning demographic transformation, social welfare, digitalisation and the environment.

Despite its ostentatiously anti-globalist rhetoric, **the Erdoğan administration is not only couching its family policies in the global UNDESA script, but it is also funding them through UN programmes.** Simultaneously, within the documents circulating at the global level, it is hiding its counterinsurgency tactics towards the LGBTI+ community behind the ambiguity of concepts such as "harmful tendencies against the family".

At its core, Erdoğan's securitisation of queer individuals rests on the challenge of Turkey's demographic change and its impact on the economy. In his address, Erdoğan portrayed the aging population as an existential threat to Turkey's economic and military strength, linking it to supposed external influences undermining traditional family structures. His claim that there are "malicious intents" behind family planning projects reinforces this narrative. **However, the fact that Turkey's fertility rate is almost the same as Iran's dispels the notion that queer individuals are responsible for demographic change,** as Iran has been closed off to any international norm activism regarding sexual orientation and gender identity rights. Nonetheless, dropping fertility rates, indeed, pose a risk to Turkey's growth strategy, which is based on cheap labour.

Since 2001, Erdoğan has been pointing out the steady decrease in fertility rates, and already in 2007 he reminded his audience of his call for "at least three children". **In fact, the alarming discourse today is an admission of the ineffectiveness of demographic policies by the leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power for almost a quarter of a century.** Erdoğan's migration policies demonstrate his willingness to compensate for decreasing fertility rates with immigration, in defiance of widespread social discontent.

If demographic change poses a threat to Erdoğan's growth strategy, the waning of the patriarchal family structure challenges his claim to authority. The president asserts that "the family is a small-scale society, and the society is a large-scale family." The projection of a patriarchal division of labour within the family to the society at large, however, comes with significant economic costs: **Turkey presents an exception to worldwide trends, as labour market transformation reduced both labour force participation levels and employment rates among females.** The government does not seem to be concerned about the costs of excluding women from the labour market and how inclusion might improve not only the economic performance of the country, but also women's social standing. **Women under the AKP have carried the burden of Turkey's economic production and demographic reproduction.** Can they do more in the face of rising poverty levels and inflation with the help of the economic subsidies announced by Erdoğan? The president's new policy seems to be conflating families with small and medium-sized enterprises, and the newly founded Family Institute and Demographic Policy Board offers no solutions in this regard. ([Mehmet Sinan Birdal](#))

Three Questions for...



Ayhan Kaya is a CATS Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), focusing on social movements and nationalism in Turkey and their impact on Europe-Turkey relations. He is a Professor of Politics and Jean Monnet Chair of European Politics of Interculturalism at Istanbul Bilgi University, where he also directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence.

What are the real motives behind the Turkish government's 2025 "Year of the Family" initiative, which offers welfare benefits to women to encourage them to have more children?

The Turkish government's Family Year initiative is officially aimed at countering declining birth rates, with fertility dropping to 1.51 in 2023 – well below the replacement level. Measures include interest-free loans for couples, financial aid for new mothers and expanded childcare services. However, ideological motives play a greater role. The AKP's blend of neoliberalism and Islamic conservatism prioritises the traditional family unit as a pillar of social stability, shifting social welfare responsibilities from the state to families and religious charities. This aligns with the party's broader stance, as seen in Türkiye's 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which was justified under similar reasoning.

What is the impact of this agenda on women, youth and the LGBTIQ+ community?

Türkiye's Family Year initiative promotes a three-generational family model, positioning it as an alternative to Western individualism, which is also associated with LGBTIQ+ rights. It encourages youth to remain closely tied to their families and take on caregiving roles. This agenda reflects the AKP's long-standing ideological stance, seen in Erdoğan's 2012 speech advocating for a "pious youth". The government has also weaponised LGBTIQ+ issues, portraying them as a threat to family values – a tactic used by right-wing populist movements globally. With restrictions on women's rights, declining female employment and growing pressures on secular and LGBTIQ+ youth, many are emigrating, particularly to Germany. This contributes to resentment and radicalisation among those affected.

How is the rise of right-wing movements promoting conservative values, the traditional family model as well as anti-gender discourse, thereby shaping attitudes on gender, equality and rights in Europe?

The authoritarian populist discourse across the world concentrates on the homeland–religion–family triptych. Trump's Republican Party, Salvini's Lega and the Golden Dawn Party in Greece are good examples. It is a common practice among right-wing populist parties to fully embrace a kind of nativism based on the defence of national identity, religion and patriarchal culture. This is a form of governmentality that is designed to conceal burgeoning socio-economic conditions and build their cultural hegemony, which they could not do otherwise. Such a populist political style has also been used by the AKP for many years. This kind of political style also masks, for instance, the fact that femicide is a prevalent phenomenon in Türkiye and elsewhere.

In summary, Türkiye's approach to social welfare and family policy reflects a fusion of conservatism and neoliberalism, with the 2025 Family Year reinforcing the state's vision of a self-sufficient, faith-oriented and intergenerational family model as the foundation of society.

Interview by [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#)

Recommendations

CATS Network Partner [Elif C. Arıan](#) (IstanPol) examines the impact of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on patriarchal violence and the implementation of Law No. 6284. The paper analyses these implications within national and transnational contexts, highlighting the influence of rising anti-gender movements and militarism on EU-Turkey relations.

In this episode of the BBC podcast "The Inquiry", [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#) joins a panel of experts to explore the impact of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on women's safety, whether Turkey's domestic violence laws provide similar protection and the rise of anti-gender rhetoric in mainstream politics.

This CATS-funded webinar in the [ELIAMEP-Medycascope Media Series](#) on "The Role of Women in Turkish Society", hosted by [Dimitris Tsarouhas](#) and featuring [Nilgün Arısan Eratp](#), [Levia Şan](#) & [Alice Evans](#), examines women's participation in civic life, female employment in Turkey, the Istanbul Convention and domestic violence.

Turkey's withdrawal in 2021 from the Istanbul Convention, which is aimed at combating violence against women, reflects President Erdoğan's strategy to secure conservative support. In this SWP Point of View, [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#) argues that the withdrawal provides him with three political advantages that will help him retain political power amid economic challenges.

In this research article, [Mehmet Sinan Birdal](#) explores how anti-LGBTI+ campaigns in Turkey have contributed to regime consolidation since 2015, with sexual politics being best understood through a population-centred counterinsurgency paradigm that mobilises citizens against queer individuals as geopolitical threats. By comparing two ideologues of political queerphobia, he contends it to be a product of the cartelisation of different interests in regime-building, rather than a single issue.

The Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative cordially invites you to the panel discussion "German Elections: The Day After" on 24 February 2025, from 16:00–17:30 at IPU Karaköy, Istanbul. Please click here to register: <https://i1.co/QsdG51puv>

Kind regards,

The CATS Team

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