

CATS Network Roundup

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey



Sinem Adar



Hürcan Aslı Aksoy

Dear Readers,

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

In this issue, we take stock of **Turkey after the municipal elections**, examining the **fragmentation of power** - but also the potential for the **AKP and CHP parties to reconcile their domestic and foreign policy objectives**. We look at the impact of the elections on **President Erdoğan's aim to consolidate power**, the **future of the rule of law** in Turkey and the **government's push for a new constitution**. We also look ahead to this week's **European election**, and question **its implications for EU-Turkey relations**.

The CATS Network Roundup will continue to be released in June and July before the summer break, and will thereafter continue from September onwards.

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

On the Spot



picture alliance / abaca | Depo Photos/ABACA

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced a new era of **"political détente"** after meeting with Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Özgür Özel on May 2. The meeting was initiated by Özel after the CHP's unexpected victory in the [local elections on 31 March 2024](#).

That election saw Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lose its first-party-status – which it had held for twenty years – to its historical nemesis, the CHP. This poses a challenge to Erdoğan and the AKP leadership just at the point where they seemed to have become "politically comfortable" after [consolidating power](#) in last year's parliamentary and presidential elections.

Despite public announcements of "détente", Ankara has cracked down on critics and opponents. Around 200 people were detained at May Day protests. A proposed law criminalising **"agents of influence"** is causing consternation. [Osman Kavala's application for a retrial](#) was denied on May 15. The following day, 24 (pro-)Kurdish politicians, including Selahattin Demirtaş, were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 9 to 42 years in the [final trial of the Kobane case](#). On June 3, Ankara appointed a trustee to [Hakkari Municipality](#), which was won by the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party and detained the city's elected mayor.

The push for a new constitution

While the CHP's unexpected success is a setback for Erdoğan's goal of consolidating the presidential system, the government's efforts to push for [a new constitution](#) suggest that it will not back down easily.

Erdoğan has underlined that he would expect the CHP's support for a new constitution that eliminates **"the spirit of the coup" and adopts "an innovative and libertarian"** approach. The CHP has so far [refused](#), asking the AKP to abide by the current constitution and respect the rulings of the Constitutional Court (for example on imprisoned MP [Can Atalay](#)) and the European Court of Human Rights (referring to the [Gezi Park trials and Osman Kavala](#)).

"An opposition party within Turkey, a national party outside Turkey"

While the AKP's attempts to gain the CHP's support for a new constitution remain fruitless, space for negotiation does seem to exist. On May 17, Erdoğan pardoned a number of elderly generals who had been imprisoned over the 1997 "post-modern coup" that ousted the Islamist Welfare Party from power. Given that Özel [reportedly](#) raised the issue at the meeting with Erdoğan, this was likely a goodwill gesture intending to please the CHP's nationalist right wing.

Aligning views on foreign policy and securitisation of the Kurdish issue also appears to be on the agenda. In recent years the CHP has not always acted in harmony with the AKP. In 2020, it voted against a parliamentary motion to authorise sending troops to Libya, and a year later objected to the extension of deployments in Syria and Iraq.

Against this backdrop, the AKP leadership seems to have welcomed Özel's description of the CHP as **"an opposition party within Turkey and a national party outside the country"**. At his meeting with Erdoğan, Özel called for the **"state tradition"** of foreign affairs briefings before visits abroad to be revived. Erdoğan responded positively and even ordered, Özel noted, that the CHP be briefed by the Interior and Defence Ministries (as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) **"when necessary on pertinent issues"**.

Rallying the opposition around the flag

According to pro-AKP journalist [Abdülkadir Selvi](#), the CHP leadership's reaction to plans to hold municipal elections in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria on June 11 will be a test for Özel's stance.

The Autonomous Administration is run by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Turkey views as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ankara – along with the EU and the United States – designates the PKK as a terrorist organisation. On May 28 Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the AKP's core ally the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), accused Washington of "plotting" with **"the PKK's proxy"** to partition Syria. He went on to criticise "détente" efforts in general and urged Özel to distance himself from DEM Party and align with Turkey's interests. Özel's description of the Kobane trial verdicts as **"political"** also faced backlash from Bahçeli.

Elite fragmentation within the People's Alliance

Besides reconfiguring the electoral dynamics between the AKP and the CHP, the local elections also exposed tensions within the People's Alliance. Bahçeli, for instance, accused the pro-AKP journalist Selvi (without naming him explicitly) of **"agenda setting"** for [suggesting](#) that there might be grounds for granting Kavala a retrial.

Yet, disagreements within the ruling alliance do not follow strictly partisan or ideological lines. Some pro-AKP journalists are indeed closer to Bahçeli, [see](#) Gezi (and Kobane) as key to national security, and do not expect any fundamental changes.

Such intra-alliance tensions are indeed intrinsic to Turkey's political system as factions compete for influence. During times of crisis, groups with strong stake in the [status-quo](#) tend to dominate the public debate and form [temporary alliances](#) against pro-reform actors that are largely sidelined or marginalised.

Despite this elite fragmentation, however, the ruling alliance is held together by four elements: i) securitisation of the Kurdish question, ii) the narrative of a strong Turkey able to play hardball with global powers, iii) corruption, and iv) impunity. Nevertheless, the AKP's local election losses weaken Erdoğan's leverage within his alliance, and will erode the regime's stability and its control over competing factions. (Sinem Adar)

Three Questions for...



Marc Pierini is Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe, where his research focuses on developments in the Middle East and Turkey from a European perspective. Pierini was a career EU diplomat from December 1976 to April 2012. He was EU ambassador and head of delegation to Turkey from 2006 to 2011.

Far-right parties are expected to perform well in the June 2024 European elections. If they are able to form a bloc they could even become the second-largest group in the European Parliament. What would that mean for EU-Turkey relations?

I expect the new parliament to focus on three key issues concerning Turkey: The first is irregular migration to the EU via Turkey, because this is an issue raised by most of the political parties in the European Parliament. Secondly, the compatibility of Turkey's foreign policy choices with EU interests in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Southern Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean. These questions divide the political parties. Thirdly, the rule of law situation in Turkey, which is a high priority for the mainstream political parties.

How will the new European Parliament affect the European Union–Turkey deal on refugees?

The EU-Turkey agreement on irregular migrants and refugees is likely to be extended. Obviously, it will not be ideal. But – for all their moral and practical deficiencies – such deals have become an established feature in the Mediterranean region, as the cases of Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt show.

Given the European Council's rather simplistic conclusions on Turkey, what are the key issues and challenges between the EU and Turkey?

The European Council conclusions of 18 April are neither simplistic nor lacking in subtlety. They reflect the state of play between the EU and Turkey and the precedence given to larger crises such as Russia and the Middle East. The biggest medium-term challenge will be Turkey's positioning vis-à-vis Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. If the conflict were to spread to EU and/or NATO territory, Turkey's balanced policy would become untenable. The second challenge is Turkey's rule of law architecture, which could lead to a much wider rift between the EU and Turkey than is already the case.

Interview by Hürcan Aslı Aksoy

Recommendations

In this recent [SWP Podcast](#), [Salim Çevik](#) and [Berk Esen](#) discuss post-election Turkey, the domestic and foreign policy implications of Erdoğan's defeat, and what it means for Turkey's Western allies.

An [SWP Comment](#) by [Sinem Adar](#), [Yaşar Aydın](#), [Cengiz Günay](#) and [Günter Seufert](#) examines the importance of the AKP's diaspora policy and offers valuable insights into the party's aspirations, Turkish migrants' grievances, and socio-political tensions between Turkey and EU member states.

In the run-up to the European elections in June 2024, [Marc Pierini](#) highlights the divergences between Turkey and its Western partners over the rule of law, the future of Cyprus, Israel/Hamas and Russia/Ukraine, and shows how these will affect EU-Turkey relations.

In an [SWP Aktuell](#) (in German), [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#) and [Yaşar Aydın](#) assess how Turkey's local elections constituted a test for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the face of record inflation, strict monetary policy and declining purchasing power in the urban middle class.

[Sinem Adar](#) argues in her latest piece, that although President Erdoğan has a mandate to rule until 2028, the outcome of Turkey's March 31 local elections was a major setback for the country's ruling elites.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team