



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 concerning relevant issues about Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy.

Legal proceedings against the incumbent CHP leader, Özgür Özel, and the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, reveal an escalation in Turkey's political climate. In this issue, Sinem Adar examines current developments in a political landscape that is becoming increasingly defined by legal decisions rather than democratic processes. In conversation with Berk Esen, we examine the domestic and international reactions. While over half of Turks criticise the investigations as politically motivated, most EU member states have so far avoided openly criticising the Turkish government amid international tensions.

This is the final CATS Network Roundup before our summer break. We'll be back with new updates in September!

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

On the Spot



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Turkey's courts have recently been inundated with cases involving the Republican People's Party (CHP). A key hearing, originally scheduled for 30 June, has been postponed to September. It is set to determine whether to **annul the party's 38th regular convention, during which Özgür Özel replaced the former chairman, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, after the CHP's 2023 election defeat, triggering internal strife.**

In February, **Lütfü Savaş, the former mayor of Hatay, filed for an investigation into alleged "irregularities" at the convention, seeking the removal of the new leadership.** This followed his expulsion for accusing the CHP of "collaborating with terrorism" due to its electoral alliance with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM). Three civil courts dismissed the request to overturn the leadership change, but they permitted the case to proceed on its merits. **The indictment lists Kılıçdaroğlu as the "injured party" and Istanbul's elected mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, as the "suspect".**

Legal proceedings against İmamoğlu are extensive. He is set to appear in court on 16 July over allegations of "threatening and targeting persons involved in counterterrorism efforts" after alleging political persecution by prosecutor Akin Gürlek. Viewed as **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most serious rival, İmamoğlu has already been sentenced to 2.5 years** for calling members of Turkey's High Election Council "fools" after their controversial decision to rerun the March 2019 Istanbul mayoral election – a verdict under appeal.

Additional charges include "attempting to influence a judicial officer", and "bid rigging" during his tenure as mayor of Istanbul's Beylikdüzü district. On 18 March, his university diploma, which is required for eligibility to stand for office as president, was annulled. He was arrested the next day on corruption and terrorism charges, and formally imprisoned on 23 March over allegations of constructing a "criminal network of bribery". Despite "strong suspicion", the judge decided not to arrest him over his alleged support for terrorism in the context of the CHP's cooperation with the DEM Party in the 2024 local elections.

Since İmamoğlu's arrest, five waves of operations have targeted the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Of the 267 detained, at least 97 have been imprisoned, with 8 under house arrest. District mayors from Şişli and Beylikdüzü have also been arrested on terrorism charges. CHP chairman Özalp responded with nationwide rallies. In April 2025, **Erdoğan sued Özel for labelling him a "junta leader". On 5 June, prosecutors launched a new criminal investigation against Özel** for "obstructing a judicial officer" and "insulting a public official", citing his criticisms of Gürlek.

Özel also faces internal opposition. On 24 March, Savaş submitted a second complaint to cancel an April party convention where Özel was standing for the leadership position. Özel defended the timing of the convention as a move to preempt government interference.

The breadth and intensity of legal actions targeting the CHP, the Istanbul Municipality, İmamoğlu, and Özel serve three strategic objectives. **First, they aim to disqualify İmamoğlu from the 2028 presidential race.** As a charismatic and popular figure, he represents a serious threat to Erdoğan.

Second, the legal offensive against İmamoğlu is designed not only to sideline him in the presidential race but also to politically isolate him. The parallel cases against Özel and the judicial scrutiny of party conventions aim to erode the CHP's internal solidarity. Already the existing tensions within the party and the narrow interests surrounding them are major spoilers. Another instrument to this end is the use of "effective repentance" provisions: As of 5 June, 19 detainees in the Municipality's corruption probe have been released after cooperating with authorities. On 20 June, the prosecutor warned against claims that cooperation was extracted under "coercion, threats, or blackmail" – a day after İmamoğlu described the proceedings as a "conspiracy", urging detainees to "prioritise their children's futures over (his) freedom".

Third, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is escalating the rhetorical pressure. Pro-government media are reinforcing this campaign by portraying İmamoğlu as a corrupt figure seeking to unlawfully consolidate power even before assuming higher office. **Simultaneously, intra-CHP disputes are being framed as proof of the opposition's incompetence.** Strikingly, the regime is attempting to police public memory about İmamoğlu: His X account has been blocked, and any public use of his image and voice has been prohibited.

The trials reflect a broader authoritarian impulse to erode political competition and demoralise, intimidate, and polarise opposition actors seen as competitors and rivals. Yet, **in a country with traditions of popular legitimacy and electoral mobilisation, it remains uncertain whether this legal and psychological assault will succeed.** The CHP maintains its lead in the polls – a lead that was won in the 2024 local elections, the first time in almost half a century. *(Sinem Adar)*

Three Questions for...



Berk Esen is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Sabancı University in Istanbul and a former IPC-Stiftung Mercator Fellow at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS). His research interests include the political economy of development, party politics, and authoritarian regimes, with a focus on Latin America and Turkey.

How do people perceive the ruling elite's increasing repression of the CHP, which is the oldest party and the biggest opposition in Turkey?

Turkish society has long been polarised between supporters and critics of President Erdoğan, making it rare to find issues that do not sharply divide the electorate. However, the politicised case against Ekrem İmamoğlu appears to be an exception. Despite a vicious campaign in the pro-government media, the allegations against İmamoğlu have failed to garner broad public support. According to most opinion polls, nearly two-thirds of Turkish voters view the investigation as politically motivated. This perception has enabled the CHP to successfully mobilise mass support through large-scale rallies nationwide and significantly expand its membership ranks. That said, it remains uncertain whether the party can translate this popular backing into effective resistance against the government's escalating repression, especially given the AKP's institutional control over the bureaucracy and judiciary.

How is the DEM Party positioning itself in the CHP crisis, and what does that mean for opposition dynamics?

Due to ongoing talks with the separatist Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the government managed to split the DEM Party from the rest of the opposition camp. Although these negotiations have yet to yield tangible benefits for the pro-Kurdish movement, DEM Party elites have so far refrained from fully aligning with the CHP. Instead, they appear to be waiting for the outcome of their bargaining with the government before taking a definitive stance in the CHP crisis.

Although they have criticised the judicial operations targeting CHP politicians, they have not openly participated in widespread CHP-led protests. It took nearly three months after İmamoğlu's arrest for a DEM delegation to visit him in prison – likely a sign of frustration with the stalled İmralı talks. The DEM's ambivalence has weakened the main opposition's ability to resist government pressure and has opened the door for the ruling bloc to explore constitutional amendments in parliament. Nevertheless, in the end, many Kurdish voters may still choose to vote against Erdoğan and the AKP in the next general election.

How should Europe react at a time when it is under the pressure of fragile geopolitical dynamics – from the war in Ukraine to the Israel-Iran conflict, from the rise of the far right to increased armaments?

With a few exceptions, EU member states have refrained from publicly criticising Erdoğan's government over the legal operation against İmamoğlu. Preoccupied with growing instability in Ukraine and the Middle East, the EU increasingly views Turkey as an essential partner in trade, security, and migration. Following Trump's hostile treatment, many European governments are hesitant to alienate Erdoğan, thereby normalising relations with his government completely.

While this approach may seem pragmatic, it is ultimately short-sighted and carries serious risks. In seeking to counterbalance Russia, the EU risks legitimising an electoral authoritarian regime in a strategically critical country of 85 million people on its doorstep. Turkey's potential transition to full autocracy would have profound political, diplomatic, and economic implications for Europe. Though member states may be reluctant to sever ties, they must avoid enabling Erdoğan's authoritarian consolidation and should speak out against major human rights violations, especially those in the İmamoğlu case.

Interview by Lesar Yurtsever

Recommendations

In this SWP Comment, [Yasar Aydin](#) analyses the growing risk of autocratisation in Turkey from an economic perspective, especially after the arrest of Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. He discusses the potential economic fallout and outlines policy options for both the EU and Germany. Although opposition efforts have temporarily curbed further state overreach, Aydin stresses that sustained public backing, economic stability, and a united EU are vital to safeguard democracy. For a deeper analysis of Turkey's industrial and supply chain policies, see his latest [SWP-Studie 2025/S 11](#) (in German).

In this SWP Point of View, [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Salim Çevik](#) examine Turkey's accelerating shift towards full authoritarianism under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They argue that Erdoğan strategically suppresses opposition and consolidates power while using Turkey's geopolitical importance to deflect external criticism. Without democratic foundations, they contend, Turkey's credibility as a security partner is increasingly in doubt.

The arrest of Istanbul Mayor İmamoğlu marks a turning point in Turkey's political trajectory. In an article for Arab Center Washington DC, [Salim Çevik](#) argues that it signals Erdoğan's move from competitive authoritarianism towards full autocracy, closing off key democratic avenues. Despite nationwide protests, the international response has been largely limited to rhetoric, underscoring the deepening erosion of democracy in Turkey.

[Sinem Adar](#), writing for the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), examines the Turkish public's deepening discontent, highlighting how mounting frustration with economic mismanagement, authoritarian governance, and democratic erosion has reshaped the political mood. Adar analyses how growing dissatisfaction signals a potential turning point in the public's tolerance of President Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic rule.

In this ISPI MED This Week article, various [CATS Network experts \(et al.\)](#) discuss the public perceptions and responses to the political unrest in Turkey following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor İmamoğlu, focusing on its political, social, and economic impacts amid ongoing protests and international concerns.

This Ifri article, written by [Aurélien Denizeau](#), examines the political revival of the Republican People's Party (CHP) following its landmark victory in the 2024 municipal elections in Turkey. He explores how this shift has firmly positioned the CHP as the primary opposition force to the long-ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), analysing the party's evolving strategy, leadership dynamics, and broader implications for Turkey's political future.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team