

CATS Network Roundup

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 and the judicial removal of the CHP's elected leadership are not isolated episodes. Taken together, **they suggest an effort to reshape Turkey's political order in ways that may endure beyond Erdoğan's presidency.**

In this issue, we examine **how opposition parties have responded to the government's mounting pressure on the CHP** and assess the prospects for a broad democratic alliance. We also explore how the government's ambitions have shifted: **the objective is no longer simply to win the next election**, but to redefine the terms on which political competition can take place.

This is our **final CATS Network Roundup before our summer break**. We look forward to sharing more with you when we return!

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

On the Spot



picture alliance / REUTERS | Çağla Gürdoğan

For months, the secular, centre-left CHP has faced a politically motivated judicial offensive. **Just months after emerging as the strongest party nationwide in the local elections, the CHP saw its mayors removed from office, arrested and indicted**, including Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most credible challenger in the next presidential election. On 21 May 2026, a regional court invalidated Özgür Özel's election as CHP chairman at the party's 2023 congress. As a result of the ruling, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had been voted out as party leader at that congress, returned to the party leadership. To secure his position, he is now fighting his rivals within the party.

Internationally, **the campaign against the CHP leadership is widely seen as a new stage in the erosion of democracy, the suppression of political pluralism and the dismantling of the rule of law.** "Turkey is moving rapidly toward a fully authoritarian model," said Sancho Sánchez Amor, the European Parliament's (EP) Turkey rapporteur.

The EP's latest report on Turkey is equally blunt. It accuses the government of targeting the opposition – including elected politicians, journalists, lawyers and other critics – by instrumentalising the judiciary. The report calls on the Commission and EU member states to consider sanctions, including asset freezes, against key figures in the repressive state apparatus. The report singles out Akın Gürlek who, as head of the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, oversaw the launch of the investigation into İmamoğlu in March 2025 and, a year later, the opening of criminal proceedings against him. In February 2026, Erdoğan appointed Gürlek Minister of Justice.

These developments have sparked broad outrage among Turkey's pro-democracy public. According to a survey conducted by the research institute [Gündem](#) between 24 and 27 May among 2,275 respondents, 59 per cent viewed the court ruling as interference in the CHP's internal affairs, while 33 per cent considered the decision legally justifiable. **Kılıçdaroğlu's reinstatement has likewise met with strong public opposition.** Some 62.1 per cent of respondents viewed his return negatively, whereas 27 per cent regarded it as justified. **Within pro-government circles, by contrast, the court's decision is largely seen as lawful and legitimate.**

Within the CHP, anger is no longer directed solely at Erdoğan. Increasingly, it is aimed almost as strongly at Kılıçdaroğlu, whom many party members blame for helping to trigger the crisis. Meanwhile, **Özel has gained support within the party as the leading figure resisting state interference in its internal affairs.**

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Despite ideological divides, opposition parties responded in a united manner: they have rejected the court's decision as a politically motivated and illegitimate intervention in democratic competition, and as a disregard for the will of the electorate. However, they differ in the strategic conclusions they draw.

First, there is a group of pragmatic party leaders who adapt their positions to the prevailing balance of power. Their conduct appears to be shaped less by principle than by short-term political calculation. For example, former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Future Party) argued that CHP-run municipalities must rid themselves of corruption, even though the relevant legal proceedings have yet to conclude. In doing so, he moved rhetorically closer to both the governing bloc and the CHP camp aligned with Kılıçdaroğlu.

Second, the nationalist-conservative İYİ Party and Victory Party, as well as the socialist Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), have firmly aligned themselves with the CHP's democratically elected leadership. They advocate a common political struggle to defend democracy and the rule of law. Mısavet Dervişoğlu, leader of İYİ, visited the family of the imprisoned İmamoğlu, expressed his solidarity and recognised Özel as the CHP's legitimate chairman. TİP chairman Erkan Baş adopted an equally combative tone in opposing authoritarian encroachment on democratic politics.

Third, the pro-Kurdish DEM Party has adopted a somewhat ambivalent position. It regards the court ruling both as an attack on democracy and as a threat to the ongoing talks between the government, DEM, and the PKK on resolving the Kurdish question. Within the party, many regard democracy as a precondition for resolving the Kurdish conflict, whereas others prioritise peace over democratic reform. For now, DEM remains committed to the process, although it has yet to produce tangible results and its outcome remains highly uncertain.

The opposition is not united around a common strategy for confronting the authoritarian governing bloc. Instead, parallel, and sometimes competing, approaches coexist, reflecting different priorities and time horizons. Deposed CHP leader Özel enjoys the support of the party base and seeks to build a broad democratic front. Alongside state repression, another risk is that DEM could, in exchange for continuing the negotiation process, agree to a constitutional amendment or the early dissolution of parliament, paving the way for another Erdoğan candidacy. ([Yaşar Aydın](#))

Three Questions for...



Dr. Seren Selvin Korkmaz is a co-founder and co-director of the IstanbulPol Institute. She previously served with the U.S. Department of State at the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul and has held fellowships at the German Marshall Fund, Yale University, and the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. Korkmaz has taught Middle Eastern and Turkish politics at Stockholm University.

How likely do you consider the emergence of a broad democratic alliance in Turkey? Under which political and societal conditions would such an alliance be likely?

A broad opposition alliance like the one formed before 2023 is unlikely to re-emerge. The defeat exposed the limits of large inter-party coalitions, and the post-election environment has become far less conducive to coordination. The government's increasing pressure on the opposition, the marginalisation of the main opposition, the CHP, and its efforts to reshape relations with the DEM Party have raised cooperation's costs and deepened fragmentation.

This does not rule out a broad democratic coalition, but it is more likely to be societal than inter-party. As the 2024 local elections demonstrated, coordinated electoral behaviour can emerge even without a formal coalition agreement. If economic deterioration and democratic backsliding continue, a credible presidential candidate could still unite diverse constituencies around a shared objective. The main challenge for opposition actors is to remain competitive under increasing repression.

Reactions from the EU and other international actors to recent developments in Turkey have varied considerably. How are these responses perceived within Turkey – as meaningful political pressure or largely as rhetoric without tangible consequences?

The EU's response to recent developments in Turkey is increasingly perceived through the lens of a two-track relationship. On the normative track, European institutions continue to criticise democratic backsliding and the erosion of judicial independence – statements that create a political record without imposing tangible costs on Ankara. At the same time, strategic cooperation has grown more prominent, and the perception that geopolitical priorities overshadow democratic concerns is the central problem. Domestically, this cuts both ways: the government frames criticism as foreign interference, while the opposition is cast as dependent on external actors – neither of which strengthens Turkey's democratic trajectory. The EU's challenge is to ensure that deeper engagement preserves democratic conditionality, rather than letting it become merely rhetorical.

What are the limits of the government's autocratic trajectory? To what extent can the opposition, societal resistance, or economic conditions effectively constrain Erdoğan's scope for political action?

The government's current objective is no longer simply to win the next election. It is to construct a political order capable of sustaining itself beyond Erdoğan. Recent developments – from the renewed Kurdish resolution process to judicial intervention in the CHP – should be seen not as isolated events but as elements of a broader effort to reconfigure the state's governing coalition and manage political competition on more favourable terms.

The limits of this strategy lie precisely in the fact that authoritarian control cannot eliminate electoral uncertainty. Turkey continues to experience deep economic dissatisfaction, and every additional restriction on political competition dissatis a political trade-off. While repression narrows the opposition's room for manoeuvre, it can also increase the perceived stakes of elections and generate broader mobilisation – a risk the government is well aware of.

Repression should not be understood simply as a demonstration of strength – it equally reflects the regime's recognition that its electoral dominance remains fragile. The limits of Turkey's autocratic trajectory therefore lie not only in the economy but in the regime's inability to fully control how society reacts to increasing political constraints.

Recommendations

[Leonardo Del Piccolo, Valeria Talbot, Sinem Adar and Gönül Tol](#) analyse the Turkish government's escalating campaign against the main opposition in their joint ISPJ publication, highlighting efforts to consolidate power ahead of the next electoral cycle and raising broader questions about political pluralism, institutional independence and Turkey's democratic future.

For Foreign Policy, [Salim Çevik](#) examines President Erdoğan's escalating pressure on Turkey's opposition, focusing on the CHP's internal divisions, the prosecution of Ekrem İmamoğlu, and the party's broader struggle to remain a viable political challenger. He explores what these developments mean for democratic competition in Turkey.

In her OSW analysis, [Zuzanna Krzyżanowska](#) focuses on the judicial, administrative and political measures underpinning the Turkish government's escalating crackdown on the opposition. She highlights how this wave of repression reflects efforts to consolidate power amid growing domestic challenges.

In his SWP Point of View, [Yaşar Aydın](#) reflects on the criminal proceedings against Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, highlighting how the case extends beyond legal proceedings to reflect an escalating power struggle between government and opposition, with broader implications for the judiciary, democratic governance and electoral politics.

[Ahmet Erdi Öztürk](#), in his ELIAMEP Policy Paper, examines opposition strategies in AKP-era Turkey, focusing on how the CHP and İYİ Party seek to challenge the AKP/MHP alliance's entrenched political hegemony amid institutional, social and strategic constraints. He explores how these challenges shape the prospects for democratic change in Turkey.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team