



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.

A year on from Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest, the question remains: **What has become of the Turkish opposition?** What initially appeared to be a targeted political strike in **March 2024** has since evolved into a **systematic campaign against the CHP**. The party is now fighting on two fronts: against the **government's judicial offensive**, and the **gradual depletion of its capacity to mobilise**.

Meanwhile, Turkish politics is marked by a **paradoxical situation**: while the government's institutional dominance appears firmly entrenched, a **significant proportion of society remains deeply dissatisfied**. In this issue, we **examine these developments more closely**, analysing the state of the CHP, which is caught between **institutional erosion, political isolation, and continued societal support**, and placing these dynamics within a **broader political context**.

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

On the Spot



picture alliance / Hans Lucas | Quentin Top

Nearly a year after his detention, **Istanbul's elected mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu**, remains in a Turkish prison – a case that has come to symbolise the **mounting pressure on Turkey's main opposition**. Among the numerous allegations levelled against him, the most Kafkaesque is the establishment of a **“criminal organisation for illicit gain”**. As the greatest political threat to **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, he allegedly sought, through this purported network, to enrich himself, **seize control of the Republican People's Party (CHP)**, and secure his election as president. The charge is less an indictment than it is a **testament to what Ankara fears the most**.

İmamoğlu is not the only target. **Employees of the Istanbul Municipality, numerous CHP mayors** across the country, and the **party leadership itself** have been detained, brought to trial, or placed under investigation. Internal resignations and **factional tensions** compound the pressure. Ankara's legal proceedings have resembled less a **single strike** than a **sustained campaign of institutional attrition**.

The momentum that the CHP generated in the immediate wake of **İmamoğlu's detention on 19 March 2025** has largely dissipated. **Weekly rallies continue**, albeit with dwindling public attention. The party's **presidential campaign office for İmamoğlu** – opened in July – presses on, though the **prospect of his release remains remote**. Even if he were freed, a separate obstacle awaits: **His university diploma was annulled** shortly before his detention, rendering him **ineligible for the presidency** under current eligibility requirements. The campaign, in other words, is as **much symbolic as it is operational**.

Despite this, the **CHP's presidential campaign promises** were formally presented to the public a few weeks ago at an event entitled **“At the Service of the Nation, Together with the Nation”**. The party leadership continues to call for **early elections**. These calls have been flatly **rejected** by **Devlet Bahçelî**, leader of the **Nationalist Action Party (MHP)** and a core partner within Erdoğan's People's Alliance, and met with silence elsewhere. The **arithmetic is equally unforgiving**: Early elections require either a **presidential initiative** – which would **bar Erdoğan from seeking another term** under current rules if he chooses to stand – or a **three-fifths parliamentary majority**, which the CHP cannot assemble without substantial cross-party support, including from parties within the People's Alliance.

“The main opposition party is legally besieged, politically isolated – especially at the elite level – and structurally unable to force a confrontation on its own terms.”

CHP's isolation seems to extend beyond **parliamentary mathematics**. The renewed **Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) disarmament and dissolution process** is straining the relationship between the **CHP and the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM)** without fully severing it. **DEM** finds itself navigating an **acute dilemma**: engaging constructively with a **peace process** that is expected to deliver tangible gains for **Kurdish political representation and recognition**, while managing the **reputational costs** of being seen as operating within a framework **set by Ankara**. Every step **DEM** takes towards the negotiating table increases the distance from the CHP, whose base remains sceptical of the process. Meanwhile, CHP leader **Özgür Özel's gestures of inclusion towards Kurdish voters represent a strategic necessity**, but they have also exposed a **fault line within the CHP**: Cadres who resist that direction are signalling, however unintentionally, that the **CHP's pluralism has limits**. The **partnership that helped deliver Istanbul and Ankara to the opposition in 2019** – sustained through the **2023 and 2024 elections** – is **under quiet but real stress**: It has not broken, but it is no longer the force multiplier it once was.

The **CHP's room for manoeuvre** is further constrained by a **political landscape that appears to be at a stalemate**. While the **CHP and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)** are **neck-and-neck in the polls**, **undecided voters and those who do not plan to vote** are the most decisive group. **Smaller parties** absorb a share of the discontent, thereby **fragmenting the anti-AKP space** and preventing any **consolidated opposition majority** from emerging. **Erdoğan's ability to keep the cultural battlefield active** has proven resilient, even as his **economic record deteriorates**. The **CHP is also struggling to shape the domestic narrative** while **Turkey's heightened international visibility** lends credibility to the government's **self-projection as an indispensable diplomatic actor**.

The **AKP government** may not have succeeded in co-opting the CHP leadership, but its **display of dominance is proving effective**. The **main opposition party is legally besieged, politically isolated** – especially at the elite level – and **structurally unable to force a confrontation on its own terms**. Yet the **verdict from Turkish society** is less clear. **Polls consistently register deep dissatisfaction with economic conditions**, and the **public's appetite for political change** has not disappeared – it has simply **found no adequate political vehicle for expression**. **AKP dominance, for now, looks solid**. Whether it will prove **equally durable** is another matter. (*Sinem Adar*)

Three Questions for...



Dr Lisel Hintz is currently Assistant Professor at Johns Hopkins University SAIS. She has also taught at Cornell University and Barnard College, Columbia University. With a regional focus on Turkey and the Middle East, her research areas include identity politics, authoritarianism and resistance, foreign policy and grand strategy, and the politics of pop culture and other forms of media.

One year after İmamoğlu's detention, how would you assess the way the CHP, under Özgür Özel's leadership, has handled legal and political pressure, particularly in maintaining public engagement through rallies and outreach?

I think Özgür Özel has done a formidable job of handling the many obstacles the AKP-led government put in his way. I would say he outperformed expectations, which might have been unfairly low, as he wasn't known to be a super charismatic figure. Momentum behind rallies and especially boycotts is difficult to sustain, but he did so for a long time and at a large scale – the Sarayburnu protests were the largest in Turkey since Gezi. So that's a point in his favour. There are also the unexpected victories the CHP pulled off in the 2024 municipal elections, so that's another point. And Özel's fiery condemnations of the political onslaughts against the CHP brought him into the government's crosshairs – for example, attempts to annul his election as party chair, and an investigation for “insulting” İmamoğlu's judges – without leading to his own arrest, at least not yet. This is a further point in his favour.

Considering that Ekrem İmamoğlu is widely regarded as President Erdoğan's most prominent political rival, how do recent developments in Turkey reflect the country's broader trajectory of democratic backsliding and autocratisation?

The weaponisation of the justice system against the CHP represents a slide from competitive authoritarianism towards hegemonic authoritarianism. Erdoğan now presides over political processes that don't just weaken his competition as in previous years. Back then, he leveraged the AKP's capture of state institutions and crony capitalist ties to private industry to tilt the electoral field significantly in his favour. Now he's effectively removing his main competitor from play.

But let's not forget the AKP used similar tactics of criminalising and politically disenfranchising opponents against Turkey's Kurdish movement for years. Former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, who ran against Erdoğan for the presidency from his jail cell in 2018, is still in prison. Furthermore, the Interior Ministry replaced over 150 pro-Kurdish mayors with government-appointed trustees. Arguably, the AKP honed the strategy of marginalising opposition actors it uses now against the CHP by targeting pro-Kurdish politicians.

From a comparative perspective, how should Turkey experience be understood within the global rise of authoritarianism, and how has the international community responded?

Turkey's further slide into authoritarianism is part of a broader global trend, but it's not as tangibly linked as some cases. For example, under Viktor Orbán's rule, Hungary experienced similar authoritarian consolidation in terms of the erosion of rule of law, minority disenfranchisement, media capture, and more. But Orbán and other Western autocrats are much more plugged into transnational populist-authoritarian diffusion networks than Erdoğan is – for example, close financial and personal ties between Orbán's Fidesz and MAGA elites. For Turkey, the global authoritarian shift's effects are more permissive than networked. Erdoğan is under much less scrutiny on human rights violations from Trump, a leader also consolidating authoritarianism at home, than he was under Biden. But then again, the Biden team's apparent pressure regarding cases such as Osman Kavala had little effect anyway.

Interview by *Sinem Bal*

Recommendations

In this SWP Comment, [Yaşar Aydın](#) analyses the growing risk of autocratisation in Turkey from an economic perspective following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. He highlights the potential economic repercussions and argues that the EU and Germany should condition deeper engagement – such as customs union modernisation and visa facilitation – on Turkey's adherence to democratic principles and the rule of law.

Complementing this perspective, an OSW analysis by [Zuzanna Krzyżanowska and Karol Wasilewski](#) examines the increasing pressure on Turkey's opposition, particularly the CHP, despite its recent electoral gains. The authors argue that legal proceedings against party leaders and opposition mayors form part of a broader strategy to weaken the opposition while maintaining the appearance of political competition, although public mobilisation and socio-economic discontent may constrain these efforts.

[Cengiz Günay](#), in his OIIP Trend Report, examines leadership succession as a critical vulnerability in highly personalised political systems. Using Turkey as a case study, he argues that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leader-centred system relies heavily on informal power networks and patronage structures that strengthen incumbents but weaken institutions and complicate future transitions.

Similarly, [Yaşar Aydın](#) analyses the mounting pressure on Turkey's opposition, including legal proceedings against CHP leader Özgür Özel and Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. He argues that these developments reflect increasingly authoritarian tendencies while also exposing tensions between state repression and societal mobilisation within Turkey's political system.

In their SWP Point of View, [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Salim Çevik](#) analyse the implications of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest for EU–Turkey relations. They argue that increasing authoritarian repression in Turkey deepens Europe's strategic dilemma: While cooperation with Ankara remains important, democratic backsliding undermines trust and complicates closer political engagement.

[Sinem Adar](#) highlights growing public discontent in Turkey. She argues that economic hardship, declining trust in institutions, and increasing authoritarian governance have intensified dissatisfaction, particularly among younger generations. At the same time, these grievances have fostered new forms of civic mobilisation, highlighting tensions between regime consolidation and societal demands for political change.

In his report for CATS Network Partner Istanbul, [Edgar Şar](#)'s examines the parallel processes of autocratisation in Turkey and Hungary. He analyses how elected leaders in both countries have overseen profound democratic decline after coming to power through free elections. Adopting a comparative perspective, Şar traces how constitutional manipulation, judicial capture, and media control have gradually transformed these democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes.

For readers interested in Turkey's political transformation, the in-person WZB Ingelheim seminar (in German), [“Ist die Türkei noch eine Demokratie?”](#) (Is Turkey still a democracy?), to be held on 29–30 May 2026, offers an in-depth look at the country's political, social, and economic developments.

Kind regards,
The CATS Team

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