

## Turkey 2023

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's general election



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2023", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments and analysis on Turkey's general election.

In our seventh and final issue, we examine the **consequences for Turkey's opposition** after its recent election defeat, the **overwhelming support for President Erdoğan among Turkish voters in Germany**, and look ahead to **future EU-Turkey relations**.

Finally, should you have any questions or suggestions, then please e-mail us at [cats@swp-berlin.org](mailto:cats@swp-berlin.org).

### On the Spot



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Turkey's main opposition party, the Nation Alliance (NA), received fewer votes than expected in the long-awaited May 2023 general elections. **Although the 48 per cent of the votes received by the opposition in the presidential runoff demonstrated a solid bloc** against the continuation of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule, the result ultimately shows that **the opposition has failed to push on following the 2018 general elections**.

The opposition's alliance strategy clearly failed to mobilise a majority of voters. However, **the upcoming local elections in March 2024 offer the opposition parties a chance to avoid total disintegration**. The opposition's victory in the 2019 local elections in the country's biggest metropolitans, Istanbul and Ankara, was considered back then the beginning of the end of the Erdoğan era. The 2024 local elections, on the other hand, will determine whether the opposition bloc can hold it together after this year's defeat.

In the runoff, the joint opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu received more votes than President Erdoğan in almost all the metropolitan cities run by the opposition since 2019. So, **if the opposition bloc remains united over the course of the next nine months, it has a realistic chance of keeping control of the local governance of these cities**. However, President Erdoğan's tenacious refusal to cooperate with opposition-led municipalities, which he is likely to maintain until March 2024, might create a dilemma for the swing voters in these cities. Indeed, in his first "balcony speech" in the runoff night, **Erdoğan made it clear that winning back Istanbul would be his priority in the months to come**.

Nevertheless, **staying unified after the demoralising election defeat will be no easy task for the opposition**, not only because of Erdoğan's masterful divide-and-rule approach to the opposition, but also due to the internal crises manifesting in each of the opposition parties.

The main opposition group, the Republican People's Party (CHP) is already in the throes of a conventional post-election leadership debate. **After more than a decade of chairmanship and five general election defeats, Kılıçdaroğlu is still not signalling retirement**. Meanwhile, his most likely successor, the popular mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, is on the horns of dilemmas. If he eventually decides to challenge Kılıçdaroğlu for the party leadership, he will be obliged to give up a second term as the mayor of Istanbul, which would be a clear blow to the opposition's chance of winning back the city in March 2024. **With a political ban hanging over him like the Sword of Damocles, İmamoğlu's ultimate decision will affect not only his political career but also the future of Turkish opposition**. And although Kılıçdaroğlu and İmamoğlu have so far appeared to act in tandem to shape the party's future, Kılıçdaroğlu's insistence on leading the CHP into the 2024 local elections might spark a backlash from some opposition voters.

The Good (İYİ) Party was yet another election loser. Ahead of its congress later in June, Party Chair **Meral Akşener will face strong criticism if not an outright challenge for the party leadership**. What is more, due to the party's scepticism of Kılıçdaroğlu's joint candidacy, it may have already left the NA. In any case, **the İYİ Party will be more demanding than ever when negotiating the continuation of the NA with the CHP for the local elections**.

**The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) will also have to engage in some soul searching** ahead of the local elections, with a decreasing capacity to motivate its supporters to vote a major challenge for the party. In the 2019 local elections, the strategy of winning in the southeastern strongholds and defeating the ruling bloc in the west had worked quite well. But the ruling bloc's persistence on replacing HDP mayors with government-appointed trustees will likely enforce the HDP to re-examine its entire local election strategy. **The HDP's final decision will not only determine its fate, but also affect the opposition's chances of winning back big metropolitans** such as Istanbul, Adana, Mersin and Antalya.

In sum, the unexpected electoral defeat would normally have devastating consequences for the opposition bloc. However, the upcoming local elections have so far seemed to stymie radical changes from taking place in Turkish politics. **The opposition must self-evaluate and concentrate on these local elections because a defeat is simply not an option this time round.** (*Edgar Şar*)

### The Polls

**President Erdoğan won in both rounds of voting twice as many votes** (65.5, 66.2 per cent) as the joint opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu (32.5, 32.8 per cent) among Turkish voters in Germany. So, how did this overwhelming support come about? **One explanation is Erdoğan's omnipresence in the Turkish media consumed by the Turkish diaspora** – he was even at the forefront of most of the media coverage in Germany of the Turkish elections. Due to his 20-year term of office, he is now considered by many Turkish voters an experienced statesman. Meanwhile, Kılıçdaroğlu was largely considered an unknown with scant executive experience. **For German Turks, infrastructural modernisation in Turkey is Erdoğan's sole achievement** while they are not directly affected by the decline of democracy or restrictions on human rights in Turkey.

**With Erdoğan's victory, the chance for a democratic transition has receded further into the background**. It is therefore understandable that Erdoğan's election victory and Turkish youths celebrating this publicly in several German cities have caused disappointment and outrage in Germany. What is less clear, however, is the media portrayal of German Turks as united behind autocracy while living in a liberal democracy. However, **that the majority of German Turks voted for Erdoğan is more myth than reality**: of the three million German Turks and 1.5 million Turkish citizens living in Germany who were eligible to vote, only 509,000 (17 per cent of all Turks living in Germany) voted for him – with a voter turnout of 50 per cent. **There is no scientific research done on the motives and party preferences of Turkish non-voters in Germany**, nor on how German citizens of Turkish origin would vote if they were eligible to do so. (*Yaşar Aydın*)

### Recommended Readings

Considering the broad appeal that the AKP and Erdoğan have among the Turkish diaspora, *Sinem Adar* analyses in this SWP Research Paper [the political attitudes of migrants from Turkey and their German-born children](#).

Reflecting on the re-election of President Erdoğan and the consequences for EU-Turkey relations, *Zachary Paikin* (CEPS) explains [why the European Union should not give up on a reset with Turkey](#).

In this SWP podcast, *Hürcan Aslı Aksoy* and *Salim Çevik* discuss how [President Erdoğan managed to secure a third term](#), why the opposition failed to unseat the president and what the election results mean for Ankara's relations with its allies.

### Three Questions for...



*Ilke Toygür is a Senior Associate with the CSIS Europe Program and a professor at the University Carlos III of Madrid. Her main research areas include Turkish foreign policy and its relations with the West, European integration, Euroscepticism, political parties and elections in Western Europe, the geopolitics of Europe and transatlantic relations.*

**Erdoğan's election victory raises questions about the future of Turkey's political system, and there are now increasing fears that the erosion of democratic institutions and norms will continue. How should the EU deal with that?**

I think the EU will not deal with that – rather, it is simply going to learn to live with it. The European Parliament Standing Rapporteur for Turkey has already suggested that the accession process lost its purpose and a reflection period is needed. Not all the EU institutions and member states are ready for a change of framework. However, the conversation on how to build a framework that fosters rules-based cooperation and shores up the normative foundations of the relationship has begun.

**What are the key economic and geopolitical challenges in EU-Turkey relations?**

I think the key issue here is Russia's war in Ukraine - the EU and Turkey have differences when it comes to approaching Russia. There are also disagreements regarding the future of continental security - Turkey's attitude towards Sweden and Finland's NATO membership has been a key demonstration of that.

There are also other issues of economic security, connectivity and global governance that need dialogue. It is crucial that the EU and Turkey use common platforms – like the European Political Community – more effectively to understand each other's position and to try to converge.

**In their congratulatory messages to President Erdoğan on his election victory, EU leaders stressed that they looked forward to advancing EU-Turkey relations. What possible opportunities and conflicts do you see?**

European leaders were waiting for the Turkish elections to be over. And now that they are, they are now trying to find ground for cultivating a more positive and predictable dynamic with the country. I think an honest conversation is needed when it comes to common challenges and opportunities. The European continent is going through immense changes – especially when it comes to conventional security but also economic security. A frank dialogue on all these issues is needed.

*Interviewed by Çetin Demirci*

That's it for our last CATS Network's roundup "Turkey 2023".

Thanks so much for sharing these past few weeks with us, and we look forward to some exciting new projects in the near future!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team