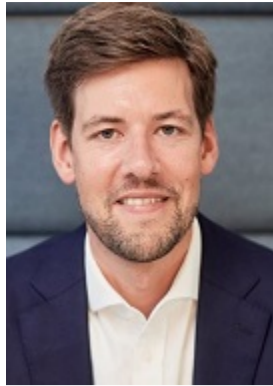


## Turkey 2024

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's upcoming March 31 municipal elections



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2024", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments, and analysis in the run-up to Turkey's municipal elections on 31 March.

In this **final issue** before the elections, we take a look at the **challenging living conditions in Istanbul** and the election **promises of the two leading candidates to improve them**. In light of the more than **80 city partnerships** between Germany and Turkey, we also ask how actors at the **municipal level can contribute to the relationship between the two countries** and how the cities themselves benefit from this cooperation.

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

### On the Spot



All eyes are on Istanbul during the local elections in Turkey, but these elections are far more than just a local concern. The result in the metropolis will be decisive for the future of the Turkish opposition as well as of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Nevertheless, **the election campaigns of the main candidates are largely revolving around concrete proposals for improving the living conditions of Istanbul's more than 15 million inhabitants**. And the most pressing issues are transport, economic needs, and earthquake risks.

#### Stuck in Traffic

Istanbul is one of the most congested cities in the world, with the **average driver wasting reportedly around 3.5 years of their lives in traffic**. Even though Istanbul's public transport infrastructure is highly diversified – consisting of metros, buses, trams, trains, cable cars, ferries, and minibuses – its capacities fall short of what is required to effectively handle the millions who commute each day. This is a major issue of contention between the candidates, all of whom are announcing **competing infrastructure projects** on numerous billboards across the city.

**Ekrem İmamoğlu**, the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate and incumbent mayor of Istanbul, underlines that Istanbul is the only city in the world to **have constructed 10 metro lines simultaneously**. The new project he has announced is "Accessible Istanbul", which **envisages a new metro line with a capacity of up to 1.5 million passengers per day over a distance of 75 km**. His opponent, **Murat Kurum** from the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is belittling the incumbent's achievements and **promising to double the rail network** within five years, eventually expanding it to more than 1,000 km within a decade. He has also announced plans for **two large tunnels, additional buses, and boat lines**, as well as new parking lots to relieve traffic congestion.

#### Deterioration of Living Conditions

However, the availability of public services and transport are only one pressing issue in a city that has become increasingly unaffordable amidst **inflation that is approaching 120 per cent**, according to the independent ENAG group. In August 2023 Istanbul hiked its public **transport fares by 51 per cent**, and housing prices experienced one of the most dramatic increases worldwide in 2023. The Istanbul Planning Agency claims that **rental prices in Istanbul increased by 732 per cent within the past four years**. According to estimates, it takes almost three minimum wages for an average family of four to make a living in today's Istanbul. "Eye-watering inflation" has been one of the reasons why **Istanbul ranks as the "least liveable city" in Europe**, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's "Global Liveability Index 2022".

To ease economic pressures on its citizens, **both candidates have announced several social support programmes** to make life in Istanbul more bearable. **İmamoğlu** is promising direct **social support** to 600,000 households, particularly to pensioners, as well as **inexpensive food** in the city's restaurants and bakeries. He is also planning on providing 20,000 **new social housing** units, as well as **free transport and health care services for certain groups**. **Kurum is targeting the youth with education support packages, free transport, and gas subsidies for students** as well as grants for young entrepreneurs. Although he mocks **İmamoğlu's plans for city restaurants, both candidates share the view that social assistance is needed** for a growing number of citizens, as purchasing power is diminishing by the day.

#### Earthquake as the Major Challenge

Both **İmamoğlu** and **Kurum** link their social housing projects to the third major issue, which is the need for **earthquake-safe buildings**. The devastating earthquake in February 2023, which killed more than 50,000 people, served as a wakeup call for Istanbul's citizens and raised safety concerns once again about housing and infrastructure. **The fact that the metropolis will face a major earthquake is undisputed among experts**. According to official estimates, **more than a third of the city's buildings are classified as risky**. "Urban transformation" projects over the past decades have been criticised for being too slow and primarily driven by rent-seeking motives, further increasing population density and prices. Both candidates released their respective visions for a "Disaster Resistant Istanbul" and a "Risk-free Istanbul". These include the **construction of new buildings and the restoration of old ones, as well as technology-based disaster-prevention systems**. On this topic, the candidates seem to agree on the challenges and solutions, even though **Kurum is promising 650,000 new buildings, almost five times as many as İmamoğlu**.

In view of the large overlap of the issues and goals of the two candidates, the question for voters is: **How credible are the election promises?** This inevitably leads back to the national level. To ease economic hardship, mayors can at most mitigate the problems concerning economic policy, which is decided in Ankara. In many cases, **mayors also depend on the central government** for the approval of projects and on state banks for loans to finance construction and infrastructure projects. During his last term in office, **İmamoğlu** must have realised that these are powerful levers that can hamper urgent projects. President **Erdoğan's remarks that services are delivered more effectively when the mayor and the central government belong to the same party** is therefore correct. **It remains to be seen whether the president's stakes in the elections will attract voters or backfire**. After all, this is not just a local election. (*Jannes Tessmann*)

### Recommended Readings

Our latest [SWP Podcast \(in German\) by Jens Bastian and Yaşar Aydın](#) elaborates on the potential impact of Turkey's local elections – which are taking place in the midst of an economic and financial crisis with record inflation – as well as on domestic politics and German-Turkish economic relations.

Within the framework of this [CATS Network project](#) report, [Çiğdem Nas](#), [Ayşe Köse Badur](#), [Asmin Kavas Biloçic](#), and [Selin Özokcu](#) shed light on urban coalitions and mechanisms of cooperation between Istanbul and Berlin by providing policy recommendations based on their respective adaptation approaches to climate change.

[In this SWP Comment](#), [Hürcan Aslı Aksoy](#) and [Salim Çevik](#) discuss the political and economic implications of last year's devastating earthquakes, arguing that the centralisation of power has eroded state capacity and highlighting the need for Turkey to reform its disaster management.

### Three Questions for...



*Çiğdem Nas is the Secretary-General of the Economic Development Foundation (İKV), an NGO specialised in Turkey-EU relations. She is also an associate professor of international relations and a member of staff at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the Yıldız Technical University in Istanbul.*

**Given that there are more than 80 German-Turkish city partnerships, what have been the areas of municipal cooperation over the past five years and what lessons can be drawn from previous experiences?**

German-Turkish city partnerships are an important aspect of transnational relations. The countries are interconnected via trade and economic cooperation, which has been initiated and accelerated by the Customs Union and Turkey's candidacy to the EU. Economic cooperation and sectoral exchanges are also crucial for numerous city partnerships. Best practice learning in the fields of environmental protection, the green transition, smart city models, and renewable energy systems are valuable: Due to the fast pace of urbanisation, Turkey faces multiple challenges in providing a liveable and sustainable environment to meet the demands for better municipal services. Exchanges on the municipal level can lead to knowledge exchanges and impact citizens' well-being. As a starting point for city partnerships, person-to-person contacts and cultural exchange are important; the cultural and social links of the city's citizens support this connection, including the residents of Turkish origin in Germany.

**How have political differences and diplomatic spats between Turkey and Germany affected municipal cooperation, for example between Berlin and Istanbul?**

Although municipal cooperation may be negatively affected by diplomatic spats and other things, it has also evolved into a very important tool of forging dialogue and closer cooperation between the two countries. In times of unease in bilateral relations, municipal cooperation may be a very practical, promising, and effective way of furthering engagement and easing tensions.

**What kinds of changes can be anticipated in German-Turkish municipal cooperation in the upcoming five years?**

As municipalities are becoming more dynamic and entrepreneurial, areas of cooperation are evolving in terms of scope and depth. What is urgently needed is for municipal cooperation to deepen, in addition to supporting socio-economic development and forging closer relations between people, civil society, and the business community. I expect that in the next five years, municipal-level cooperation will evolve towards more fruitful projects and focus on the green transition, smart cities and smart solutions in terms of urban transport, urban spaces, and sustainable lifestyles.

*Interview by Yaşar Aydın and Maximiliane Schneider*

Kind regards,

The CATS Team