

Turkey Goes to the Polls: What Lies Ahead for Its Relations with the EU?

by Elif Cemre Besgür

Almost 62 million Turkish citizens will elect 600 parliamentarians and one President, potentially also several Vice Presidents, on 14 May. Four presidential candidates are standing for election: against incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been ruling the country for two decades, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is the candidate of the main opposition alliance, the so-called "Nation Alliance". However, both Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu are facing a challenger from within their own camps. On the right, ultra-nationalist Sinan Oğan may draw conservative votes from Erdoğan. On the left, Kılıçdaroğlu faces competition from Muharrem İnce. As a result, no presidential candidate might be able to secure a majority of votes in the first round, which would pave the way for a second round on 28 May.

With regard to EU-Turkey relations, the election results will determine future levels of conflict and cooperation between Ankara and Brussels. While Erdoğan's re-election may move the

country further away from the EU, Kılıçdaroğlu could put Turkey back on the path of democratisation.

The opposition's lead – and its limits

Kılıçdaroğlu is the leader of the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), which was created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first President and founder of the modern Turkish Republic. Kılıçdaroğlu is publicly known as the "Turkish Gandhi"; he proved his mediation skills by successfully preserving the unity of the six parties, known as Table of Six, despite their ideological divergences. True, his election record is not good against Erdoğan, as Kılıçdaroğlu lost to Erdoğan in nine elections. This time, however, it may be different due to a number of factors.

The first factor is the *economic crisis*. The depreciation of the Turkish Lira and the inflation surge have caused

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significant discontent. Over the last 18 months, inflation has jumped from 20 per cent to over 80 per cent,¹ although the actual rate is estimated to be over 100 per cent.² In the wake of this inflation crisis, Erdoğan's appeal has begun to wane.

A second aspect refers to *coalition strategies*. The opposition bloc encompasses Turkish, Kurdish, conservative, secular, left- and right-wing parties, the largest coalition in Turkish history with such different socio-political orientations. Their unified stand challenges Erdoğan's identity-driven polarisation discourse as they propose a more inclusive option to voters.

Furthermore, the *mismanagement of the government response to the catastrophic earthquakes* in South-Eastern Turkey also plays against the incumbent President. Public anger mounted against the government for not enforcing construction regulations properly and misspending the "earthquake taxes".³ More specifically, the population in the region, almost one-third of the overall population of Turkey, is traditionally conservative-leaning and has supported Erdoğan for two decades. However, the

mismanagement of the crisis may now shift their loyalties.

Finally, the *new cohort of generation-Z voters* may also tilt the balance in the opposition's favour. On 14 May, approximately 6 million young people will vote for the first time. Most of them are dissatisfied with their lives and Erdoğan's restrictive policies.⁴ Their vote might be decisive as they represent almost 7 per cent of the electorate.

Against this backdrop, according to the latest polls, Kılıçdaroğlu is leading with around 42.6 per cent, while Erdoğan's People's Alliance is at 41.1 per cent, İnce is estimated at about 5 per cent and Oğan at 2.2 per cent.⁵ Even though İnce might split the opposition votes and prevent Kılıçdaroğlu from winning in the first round, the opposition might still succeed in the second round.

Nevertheless, defeating Erdoğan will be no easy feat. The incumbent President and his ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), control Turkey's political institutions, including the judges of the Supreme Electoral Council (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*) and the media. Moreover, a new "disinformation law" introduced in October 2022 tightened control over social media and provided an unfair advantage to the incumbent

¹ Website of the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey: *Consumer Price Index*, <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/EN/TCMB+EN/Main+Menu/Statistics/Inflation+Data/Consumer+Prices>.

² ENAGrup website: *Consumer Price Index (E-CPI) March 2023*, <https://enagrup.org/?hl=en>.

³ Alec Luhn, "How Erdoğan's Obsession with Power Got in the Way of Turkey's Earthquake Response", in *Time*, 18 February 2023, <https://time.com/6256540/erdogan-turkey-earthquake-response>.

⁴ Louise Callaghan, "Gen Z Turks Get Ready to Put 'Unbeatable' Erdogan out of a Job", in *The Times*, 26 March 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gen-z-turks-get-ready-to-put-unbeatable-erdogan-out-of-a-job-hqbfvcczl>.

⁵ Tuba Altunkaya and Reuters, "Everything You Need to Know about Turkish Elections", in *Euronews*, 12 April 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/11/everything-you-need-to-know-about-turkish-elections>.

government in terms of control over information.⁶ Thanks to this uneven playing field, the Erdoğan government could, for example, instrumentalise the state bodies to ask for a recount, for annulling the result and/or repeating the elections, as happened in the 2019 municipal election in Istanbul. Although Erdoğan and the AKP were unsuccessful in overturning the 2019 election despite all their efforts, the opposition must be prepared for a similar scenario and be well organised, as it was in Istanbul.

Four possible scenarios – and their implications for EU-Turkey relations

Turkey's EU accession process, which has always been a driving force for democratisation in the country, is currently at a stalemate. Continuing erosion of democracy and fundamental freedoms and tensions with EU countries, especially after 2016, brought the negotiations to a freezing point. However, this may change depending on the election results.

Indeed, *should the opposition win both the parliamentary and presidential elections*, restoring democracy and fundamental freedoms will be the priority. The Table of Six have already agreed to reinstate and enhance the parliamentary system and introduce checks and balances in the event of their victory.⁷ Another significant

pledge is to gradually improve the rule of law in the country and align it more closely with Western standards. This could entail freeing political prisoners, implementing reforms to improve the functioning of the judiciary and the media, as well as fostering civil society dialogue to push the democratic transition. This scenario would open a space for dialogue that has long been blocked. Although the new administration would likely avoid aggressive actions that may provoke disputes with EU member states, however, some issues remain contentious: among them, the EU-Turkey migration deal. Kılıçdaroğlu advocates the return of refugees to Syria on a voluntary basis. Unlike Erdoğan, the opposition leader is not satisfied with the EU's support based on financial aid only but demands equal burden sharing. Thus, if the opposition succeeds, a renegotiation of the migration deal might be on the table, even though the exact requests from the new government to the EU would only become clear after the election.

In the opposite scenario – that is, *should Erdoğan win both the parliamentary and presidential election* – his authoritarian style of government will consolidate, further curbing press freedom, human rights, the separation of powers – and the state of democracy in Turkey generally. These may no longer be framed as “regrettable exceptions”, but rather become the “new normal”. Disagreement with the EU and anti-Western rhetoric will continue to dominate Turkey's foreign policy. Although the EU learnt how to deal with Erdoğan throughout his twenty years in government, this may no longer be

⁶ Freedom House, “Turkey”, in *Freedom in the World 2023*, March 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/node/6144>.

⁷ See the Table of Six's Agreement of 28 February 2022 on a Strengthened Parliamentary System, <https://chp.azureedge.net/162769dcb2b3453f83f75312cb991643.pdf>.

a sustainable approach in the future. In the event of his re-election, relations will continue to be as turbulent as they are, and both parties will not accept new arrangements unless strictly necessary. In the long run, persisting with limited and transactional cooperation on the most contentious issues, such as border security and migration, would likely deteriorate EU-Turkey relations further.

Another possibility is that *the opposition wins the parliament, but Erdoğan stays as President*. In this case, Erdoğan's dream of remaining in power as a populist-Islamist leader at the 100th anniversary of the establishment of modern secular Turkey might still come true. Institutional clashes between the presidency and the parliament would possibly arise, leading to political paralysis and perhaps even unrest. In terms of foreign policy, despite the change in Parliament, negative external perceptions – which are closely related to Erdoğan's public persona – would likely remain unchanged. Even if the Parliament were able to limit Erdoğan's powers to a certain extent and introduce democratic reforms, it would be difficult for the EU to develop a more positive approach to Turkey. Nonetheless, the EU should be prepared to welcome any democratisation efforts in the country by opening at least one of the frozen chapters in the access negotiation or modernising the customs union with Turkey, as failing to do so would be perceived as an unfair punishment against those citizens who voted for democracy.

Finally, in the (quite unlikely) scenario that *Erdoğan loses the presidency but retains the parliamentary majority*,

Kılıçdaroğlu might still be able to introduce institutional and economic reforms thanks to the enormous power granted to the President. True, the new President would still need a majority in parliament to change the presidential system. However, having lost the presidency, Erdoğan's party could also support reinstating the parliamentary system. More generally, in this scenario too, a constant conflict between the parliament and the presidency would likely arise that may slow down policymaking. This, in turn, would sap relations with the EU.

In all scenarios where the opposition is able to clinch some kind of victory, whether in parliament or at the presidency, the EU should adopt a more constructive stance towards Turkey. So far, Erdoğan's anti-EU policies and his Islamist, conservative-nationalist discourse have strengthened opponents of Turkey's EU membership. A change in the political landscape may put the EU to a major test in terms, for example, of visa liberalisation, which has always been more of an identity – rather than a technical – issue. The opposition bloc has already agreed on reforms that would meet the requirements for visa-free access to Europe. However, due to rising right-wing populism in the EU, it may be difficult for Brussels to keep its promises and take constructive steps in this direction, even if Turkey fulfils the EU's previous demands. Moreover, other issues are likely to remain contentious regardless of the election result, such as the reunification of Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities as well as territorial water conflicts with Greece. Nonetheless, if Kılıçdaroğlu wins against Erdoğan,

the new political landscape may be conducive to further cooperation or a more positive atmosphere in the relationship with the counterparts.

Turkey at the crossroads

Since a small margin of votes will determine the results according to the latest polls, post-election protests from the losing side are likely. This might hinder a peaceful transition period and increase authoritarian tendencies. However, even in the absence of public protests, should the opposition win the election, ideological differences within the winning bloc may hamper the action of the new government.

The EU should be prepared for the challenges ahead. So far, fears of Erdoğan's blackmail related to releasing Syrian refugees into the EU prevented Brussels from exerting pressure on him. However, by turning a blind eye to his authoritarian practices at the expense of short-term pragmatic goals, the EU has compromised on the country's democratic future and allowed the current regime to grow even more authoritarian. This short-sighted approach, in turn, has brought existing relations to a more fragile point than they already were. The Turkish veto on Sweden's NATO membership once again demonstrated that the current state of relations is not sustainable in the long run.

To conclude, the implications of the 14 May elections for the EU might vary depending on the results, but the areas on which they must work together, such as migration and border security, will not. While any democratic opening that

might emerge from elections should be welcomed and supported by the EU, at the same time, European policymakers should also be prepared for the fully re-elected Erdoğan scenario. Whatever the election result, Brussels will have sooner or later to engage with Ankara for the sake of European border security; however, the EU should promote democratic values regardless, even vis-à-vis a fully re-elected Erdoğan, since it has already become apparent how easily cooperation based solely on transactional interest might turn into a confrontation.

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