





ELECTIONS IN TÜRKIYE: DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UKRAINE

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In May 2023, the Republic of Türkiye held presidential and parliamentary elections. Despite the ongoing economic crisis in the country and the unification of key opposition forces against the current government, the Justice and Development Party and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to retain their positions.

Erdoğan's retention of power will mean no radical changes in the policy of the state. The Republic of Türkiye will continue to balance its foreign policy, guided by its own national interests and emphasizing its independence from external influences.

For Ukraine, this means that Ankara is still an immensely valuable partner, but not a full-fledged ally in the war against Russia. However, this position of Türkiye should not be tied exclusively to Erdoğan. Views critical of the West are very widespread in Turkish society, and the current government's election victory is partly a result of this trend. Profound changes in Turkish politics will only be possible if there is a change in the views of the population—not in the person in the chair of the President of the Republic.

Features of the Modern Political System of the Republic of Türkiye

The current political system of Türkiye can be characterized by the term "electoral authoritarianism." It is characterized by:

1. Monopoly of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the media.

During its more than twenty years in power, the current Turkish government has managed to gain control over the media space. This process particularly accelerated after the beginning of the conflict between Erdoğan and Gülen, and ended in the mid-2010s, on the wave of restrictions imposed after the failed military coup attempt in 2016. On the one hand, the authorities created new controlled media, and on the other hand, they controlled or

¹ Yilmaz I., Bashirov G. The AKP after 15 years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey. Third World Quarterly. March 2018. P. 1-19.

banned opposition publications².

Daily newspapers play an enormous role in the information space of the Republic. The Hurriyet Daily News, which was founded in 1961, was very popular. For a long time, the newspaper remained the voice of the secular, center-left opposition to Erdoğan, openly revealing its political orientation and priorities. However, in 2018, business representatives close to Erdoğan took control of the newspaper. As a result, the media's editorial policy changed (a course toward independent journalism was officially announced, which in practice meant a de facto refusal to criticize the government).

Another popular daily newspaper was Zaman, which was considered the information mouthpiece of the Gülenists in the Republic. During the period of Erdoğan and Gülen's alliance, it was used in the campaign of AKP against the secular opposition and military circles. However, the publications in Zaman about the involvement of Erdoğan's inner circle and family members in corruption deals in late 2013 marked the final break and the beginning of a fierce confrontation between these politicians. Over the next two years, the newspaper continued to criticize the activities of the Turkish authorities, which led to repressions. First, in March 2016, the newspaper was placed under the control of a public administrator, which virtually stopped its activities, and a few days after the failed military coup in July 2016, the newspaper was officially banned.

Facing criticism in the information sphere, the AKP needed its own controlled media outlet. The Daily Sabah can be considered the mouthpiece of the AKP's party propaganda. It was established in early 2014 to provide attractive coverage of the ruling political forces in the face of gradually increasing criticism of them, both from supporters of secular Kemalist views and former religious allies. Over the years, Daily Sabah has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to party interests by mercilessly criticizing opposition to the Turkish government (both internal and external) and agitating readers to support the AKP and Erdoğan.

Another pro-government newspaper in the Republic of Türkiye is Yeni Şafak, which was founded in 1994. At the initial stage of its existence, it took a conservative stance, criticizing the activities of both Turkish liberals and Islamists. However, after the Albayrak holding, close to Erdoğan, gained control in 1997, the newspaper transformed its view of events towards supporting the course proclaimed by the then mayor of Istanbul. The situation did not change after the founding and electoral victories of the AKP—Yeni Şafak continues to serve the interests of the ruling regime.

The official news agency of Türkiye is the Anadolu Agency, established in 1920. It presents the state's perspective of the situation. This determines its certain dependence on the ruling political force, which became especially noticeable after the AKP came to power.

2. Patronage and affiliation of AKP regional branches with local authorities.

The AKP built control over the country on the basis of neo-patrimonialism. The AKP artificially created conditions aimed at ensuring the inflow of its supporters into the ranks of the state's economic elite. Through its policies, it promoted the emergence of a "new bourgeoisie"—businessmen and middle-class representatives who "made their way up" and

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² Semenova G.O. Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism in the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Türkiye (in Ukrainian). Dissertation of Candidate of Political Sciences. Specialization: 23.00.04. Vinnytsia-Chernivtsi, 2021. 295 p.







moved to the center from the regions with the party's help. Their enrichment was ensured by access to government contracts and orders, and their future and prospects are directly linked to the political future of the party and Erdoğan personally³.

One of the most influential channels for ensuring mass patronage was the interference of the ruling political force in the planning and execution of the distribution of state resources aimed at ensuring social protection and economic well-being of the population. The authorities actively used indirect economic leverage to sway the electorate. Regions and cities that supported the AKP received preferences and state subsidies as part of social programs. In contrast, the centers of opposition forces were left without proper attention and funds necessary to implement the necessary programs and initiatives. Thus, a system was built in which loyalty to the government was rewarded with financial injections, while criticism of the government was punished with insufficient attention and ignoring existing problems⁴. In terms of governance, there was also a gradual merger of state authorities and local AKP branches. It is becoming common for party-affiliated personnel to combine political and administrative functions. On the one hand, this makes it easier for the center to control the situation on the ground. On the other hand, it creates the image of the AKP as a non-alternative force responsible for state activities.

3. The prevalence of "strongman rule".

Turkish society as a whole is characterized by a tendency to gravitate toward leader-type regimes. This can be clearly seen in the history of the Republic of Türkiye. The father of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, not only fully controlled it during his lifetime, but also laid down the ideological framework that determined the future path of Turkish politics. As a result, a trend of "leaderism" has emerged in the Turkish political system. The need for a "strong hand" and faith in a leader have become signs of the preferences of the population, which very often associates the categories of ideology and politics with a specific personality/political figure. This trend was true for the electorate of all political poles of the Turkish party system during the second half of the twentieth century. The electorate of the leading political forces linked their hopes to specific leaders who shaped the political life of Türkiye (Bülent Ecevit—for the center-left Kemalists; Süleyman Demirel—for the center-right pro-Western forces; Necmettin Erbakan—for traditional Islamists; Alparslan Türkeş—for nationalists).

Erdoğan's popularity is in line with this trend. At the beginning of his career, playing on the opposition of the people to the corrupt elite, he actively used his low social background to form the image of a "man of humble origins" who "made himself." He assumed the authority of "the voice of ordinary people," a leader in their struggle against the old elites. An important contribution to the formation of his image was the constitutional reform of 2007, thanks to which Erdoğan became the first politician to be elected to the presidency by national vote. This contributed to the formation of his image as the "Man of the Nation"—a

³ Oner I. Existential threats bringing Erdoğan and Maduro together. Ahval. URL: https://ahvalnews.com/venezuela-turkey/existential-threats-bringing-erdogan-and-maduro-together

⁴ Yilmaz I., Bashirov G. The AKP after 15 years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey. Third World Quarterly. March 2018. P. 8.

person who personifies the Turkish people and is the conductor of their will⁵. In the eyes of conservative religious circles, he is the "Turkish Muslim Messiah," a leader who is responsible for revitalizing the global Muslim community⁶. The existing geopolitical successes in the context of promoting the idea of Turkic solidarity (both real, such as support for Azerbaijan in the victorious 44-day war of 2020, and imaginary) strengthened Erdoğan's position among supporters of pan-Turkic ideology.

4. High level of political activity in Turkish society.

Turkish society is politically active. For the population of the country, the issue of participation in elections is an important duty that people want to fulfil (in the case of presidential elections, this is probably explained by the euphoria of the fact that the population has only recently—since 2014—been able to elect the head of state by direct vote, as part of national elections). This is confirmed by the traditionally high voter turnout. In particular, in 2023, about 87% of the electorate took part in the parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential elections; the figures for the second round of the presidential elections slightly decreased to 84%. However, it would be a mistake to equate these high rates solely with the historical nature of the last vote. In fact, similarly high turnout has occurred in previous years. In particular, in 2018, the turnout in the presidential election, which was held in one round, was over 86%: turnout in parliamentary elections almost never falls below 80%.

Key forces and specifics of the 2023 election race

Both the government and the opposition have taken the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections seriously. Opposition parties have gathered their strength, seeking to finally put an end to the twenty-year rule of the Justice and Development Party. Meanwhile, for Erdoğan, due to his age, these elections were supposed to be the last race in which he would participate. Therefore, it was crucial for him to secure power for another five years and remain undefeated in the domestic political arena.

The course of the election race was influenced by a number of factors. The deep economic crisis in the country contributed to the optimism of the opposition. The depreciation of the national currency, the Turkish lira, which began in the summer of 2018, is still ongoing. In recent years, its exchange rate against the U.S. dollar has been steadily declining, repeatedly setting an anti-record⁸.

In such circumstances, it was natural to expect the population to be dissatisfied with the government's policies. In the case of Türkiye, Erdoğan's responsibility was even greater than one might assume. By making the planning of the state policy strategy a personal matter, the president-controlled Türkiye's economic policy. In the face of the financial

⁵ Akyol M. Erdoganism [noun]. Foreign Policy. June 21, 2016. URL: https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/21/erdoganism-noun-erdogan-turkey-islam-

akp/?utm_content=buffer9daf0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁶ Savchuk T. Putin, Erdogan, Xi: the cult of personality in modern politics (in Ukrainian). Radio Liberty. URL: https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/putin-erdogan-xi-kult-osoby/29486180.html.

⁷ The Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu). URL: https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.

⁸ Tsurkan R. Turkish lira exchange rate plummeted to a record low. Details, 03/16/2023. URL: https://podrobnosti.ua/2469002-kurs-turetsko-lri-rekordno-obvalivsja.html.







crisis, he consistently opposed raising interest rates, and thus contributed to the depreciation of the national currency.

The devastating earthquake in Türkiye on February 6, 2023, could have been another blow to Erdoğan's reputation, and it was completely unexpected, unlike the economic crisis. Large-scale casualties (more than 50,000 dead⁹) and material damage have set new challenges for the current government. Moreover, it was possible to avoid some of the destruction if the construction rules had been followed, which raised the issue of finding the culprits and the authorities' responsibility for the situation.

Nevertheless, time has shown that the earthquake factor could not substantially affect the election race. Supporters and opponents of the current government had different assessments of its efforts to respond to and eliminate the consequences, while remaining firm in their beliefs. Moreover, the continued depreciation of the Turkish lira also did not cause Erdoğan to lose much support. Polls showed that he was at least not far behind the opposition candidate, which was a strong bid for ultimate success in the current environment.

Thus, the opposition was unable to take full advantage of the trump cards it was given. The fault lies with the oppositionists themselves, who united but failed to present themselves properly to the electorate. The Turkish opposition looked very uneven.

The opposition Nation Alliance (the Table of Six) includes representatives of political forces with different views, in particular:

- The Republican People's Party (CHP) is the oldest political force in the country, uniting Kemalists and professing center-left views;
- The Good Party is a nationalist group that split from the Nationalist Movement Party after the latter allied itself with Erdoğan;
- The Felicity Party are traditional Islamists;
- The Democrat Party is a center-right political force that in the past (before the Erdoğan era) was a key opponent of the CHP.
- The Democracy and Progress Party is a political force created in 2020 by Ali Babacan, one of the founders of the Justice and Development Party, after he moved to the opposition to Erdoğan;
- The Future Party is another party created in late 2019 by Erdoğan's former ally Ahmet Davutoglu after he joined the opposition.

In practice, they were united only by the desire to overthrow Erdoğan, which is not a sustainable consolidating factor in the long run, and did not convince the part of the electorate that was still hesitant to define their position.

⁹ Death toll climbs above 50,000 after Turkey, Syria earthquakes. AlJazeera, 25.02.2023. URL: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/25/death-toll-climbs-above-50000-after-turkey-syria-earthquakes

The opposition was also adversely affected by the delay in negotiations on the nomination of a single candidate. In the end, the choice was made in favor of the leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. However, it may not have been the best choice. Kılıçdaroğlu himself did not give the impression of a strong politician. Rather, he was the embodiment of the idea that Erdoğan's radical transformations in the country should be reversed. The opposition made no secret of its intention to restore the parliamentary form of government¹⁰. Under such circumstances, the opposition president had to perform a rather technical function—to ensure that the relevant promises were fulfilled.

Such a positioning, though, did not correspond well with the Turkish society's demand for a strong leader.

Erdoğan is a highly popular politician. Part of Turkish society considers him the undisputed leader of the nation. The events surrounding the failed military coup of 2016 demonstrated that his supporters are even willing to put their lives on the line to protect the current government. Erdoğan's policies are also popular. He has satisfied long-standing demands that have been circulating in Turkish society for decades. First, he abolished the discredited Kemalist norms that oppressed religion in Türkiye. Second, he managed to restore the Turkish people's faith in their own greatness in the international arena. It is also important that Erdoğan has been in power since 2003. During this time, a new generation of Turks has been born and raised, and it is difficult to imagine life without him in power.

By nominating Kılıçdaroğlu, the opposition lost the opportunity to use the factor of his age against Erdoğan, because his opponent was even older. This also offset the impact on the election results of reports of the incumbent president's health problems.

The younger generation of opposition leaders probably had the best chance of challenging Erdoğan. Its most prominent representative is the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, a representative of the CHP. He is associated with perhaps the only large-scale success of the opposition in the fight against the AKP, when he was able to defend his victory in the 2019 mayoral elections in a confrontation with Binali Yıldırım, one of Erdoğan's most trusted associates. Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş was also considered as a potential candidate. A representative of the older generation of politicians, he began his political career on the platform of nationalists and has recently enjoyed a high level of trust from the electorate.

An important step in favor of the opposition was the refusal of the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to nominate its candidate for the presidential election. Its leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, received stable support during the previous elections (9.76% in 2014, 8.4% in 2018¹¹), winning in the southeastern (predominantly Kurdish) regions of Türkiye. Since its electorate is in fierce opposition to Erdoğan, this decision of the Kurdish political force made it support Kılıçdaroğlu. Yet, the opposition's pandering to the Kurdish electorate could have scared away some of its own nationalist Pan-Turkic supporters. The Kurdish factor was also used to discredit the opposition in the public sphere through dirty tricks (videos with Kılıçdaroğlu together with the leaders of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers'

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¹⁰ Uras U. Turkish opposition parties promise return to parliamentary system. AlJazeera, 28.02.2022. URL: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/turkish-opposition-join-powers-to-return-to-parliamentary-system

¹¹ The Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu). URL: https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.







Party¹²).

In its turn, the regime in power benefited from the self-nomination of Sinan Oğan, a former member of parliament from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). As a nationalist, Oğan has criticized Erdoğan's policies in the past. His skepticism of the 2017 constitutional reform that turned Türkiye into a presidential republic and his confrontation with the current MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, who allied himself with the AKP after the 2016 military coup attempt, demonstrated the politician's opposition to the current government. At the same time, his geopolitical views and Eurasian background (including ties to the Russian Federation, where he defended his PhD thesis in 2009) naturally brought Oğan's views on foreign policy closer to Erdoğan's position. As a result, his decision to support the incumbent president before the second round played into the hands of the latter¹³.

The very fact that Oğan had the resources to run a campaign raises suspicions about the sources of his support. He could be a kind of technical candidate for the government. It is also quite possible that his resources are of Russian origin and have become an element of Russian interference in the election to support Erdoğan. By running with a nationalist platform, Oğan pulled away a part of the secular electorate that might otherwise have favored an opposition candidate. The independent, but de facto pro-government nationalist created an alternative to the Good Party of Meral Akşener, which was an integral part of the Table of Six.

Election results and prospects for Türkiye

In the long run, the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023 brought victory to the current government.

On May 14, a new parliament was elected as part of the nationwide expression of will. The ruling People's Alliance, formed around the Justice and Development Party, despite a deterioration in its performance compared to the previous elections, retained control of the parliament, winning 323 out of 600 seats. Opposition forces won 277 seats (212 seats went to the National Alliance, 65 seats to the Labour and Freedom Alliance, which united leftist and Kurdish forces)¹⁴.

On the same day, the first round of presidential elections was held in the country. The best result was shown by the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who received 49.52% of the vote (more than 27.1 million voters). The second place was taken by the leader of the united opposition (the Table of Six) Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who received 44.88% of the electorate (over 24.5 million votes). Independent candidate Sinan Oğan received the support of over 5% of voters (over 2.8 million votes). About 236 thousand people (0.43%) marked Muharrem İnce on their ballots, although he refused to participate in the race on the eve of

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¹² Ünker P., Sparrow T. Fact check: Turkey's Erdogan shows false Kilicdaroglu video. DW, 24.05.2023. URL: https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-turkeys-erdogan-shows-false-kilicdaroglu-video/a-65554034

¹³ Turkey elections: Erdogan wins endorsement from third-place Ogan. LeMonde, 22.05.2023. URL: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2023/05/22/turkey-elections-erdogan-grabs-endorsement-from-third-place-presidential-candidate 6027592 143.html

¹⁴ The Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu). URL: https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.

the election¹⁵.

Since none of the candidates received more than 50% of the vote, a second round of elections was held in Türkiye on May 28. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the election, receiving the support of 52.18% of voters (more than 27.8 million votes). His opponent received the support of 47.82% of the electorate (25.5 million voters)¹⁶.

The elections were held without any serious violations or scandals. The opposition's acceptance of the results meant that Türkiye had passed this stage of its history without plunging into turbulence and internal crisis. Erdogan, having preserved his main achievements, moved on to planning policy for the coming years.

After winning the election, he approved a new government, almost completely changing its composition.

This meant rejuvenating the team and promoting loyal officials who had already approved themselves, especially in the southern direction, in countering the most pressing threats (fighting Kurdish terrorists, responding to the civil war in Syria). In particular, the former head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Hakan Fidan was appointed to the post of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, while the post of the country's chief intelligence officer went to the former presidential press secretary İbrahim Kalın.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is personal loyalty. The heavyweights of Turkish politics, including Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, who is considered an extremely powerful figure within the ruling party, did not retain their positions. In his place was appointed Ali Yerlikaya, who has served as the governor of Istanbul since 2018.

At the same time, Erdoğan's further appointments, including the change of leadership of regional police departments, give the impression of cleansing the security system of people close to Soylu. At the same time, the police chiefs of Istanbul, Adana, and Antalya, who were not the protégés of the previous Minister of the Interior, retained their positions ¹⁷. Thus, it can be stated that Erdoğan is further consolidating power in his hands and cleansing the political system of the Republic from potential competitors within his own party, which has repeatedly taken place in the past.

Conclusions

The heated political struggle during the elections, as well as their results, showed a deep split in Turkish society around the views on the principles that should determine the future of the state. Simultaneously, the absence of major violations and mass protests, as well as the opposition's peaceful concession of defeat, confirmed the stability of the Turkish political system. Erdoğan's success in the face of a severe economic crisis in the country has emphasized the trust he enjoys among a large part of the Turkish population.

We should take into account that the 2023 elections were the last for Erdoğan (as he has

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¹⁵ The Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu). URL: https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.

¹⁶ The Supreme Electoral Council of Türkiye (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu). URL: https://sonuc.ysk.gov.tr/sorgu.

¹⁷ Gaber E. The Big Update: What is Behind the Personnel Changes in the Leadership of Türkiye's Security Sector? (in Ukrainian). UA-South, 10.08.2023. URL: https://www.uasouth.media/analysis/484?fbclid=IwAR1npGx2tL1TdUBZ4LbTqCbOHUk9p9inX5-JejPhY7UsCOsz1aK3j8hOGNQ.







repeatedly stated). In five years, the AKP will need to nominate a powerful candidate worthy of the status of Erdoğan's successor. So far, there is no obvious candidate. In the past, Berat Albayrak, a businessman and Erdoğan's son-in-law, the son of a personal friend, was allegedly groomed for this role. He was consistently (and artificially) promoted to senior positions in the state. However, his unexpected resignation as Finance Minister in 2020 marked a break with Erdoğan. Meanwhile, the Justice and Development Party should keep in mind that the next opponent of the ruling candidate will be representatives of the younger generation of the opposition, who already have strong electoral support.

In the coming years, Türkiye will continue to carry out Erdoğan's traditional foreign policy. We should not expect any dramatic changes to the course, which is based on emphasizing independence and demonstrating the Republic's influence.

With regard to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, this means maintaining a balanced position. On the one hand, Türkiye will not abandon its general support for Ukraine and recognition of its territorial integrity; it will continue to implement joint projects of interest to Ankara (in particular, in the field of military-industrial cooperation). At the same time, it will maintain a high level of relations with Russia, traditionally refusing to impose restrictions on the aggressor and taking advantage of the opportunities provided to the Turkish economy by the sanctions policy of Ukraine's partners. The position demonstrated in the summer of 2023 regarding Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal and Russia's unfriendly actions in the Black Sea (the incident with the cargo ship Sukru Okan on August 13, 2023) showed Ankara's unreadiness (and unwillingness) to confront Moscow.

Türkiye keeps promoting itself as a mediator to resolve the conflict. However, after winning the election, this issue is relatively less important for Erdoğan, as he no longer needs any foreign policy success to publicly represent the electorate. For the same reason, we can expect the Turkish government's anti-Western rhetoric to be muted.

Specific aspects of Türkiye's regional policy will depend on the nature of its relations with the West. France remains an unfriendly state for Türkiye. In contrast, relations with the United States can be resolved through compromises and agreements, particularly in the context of approving Sweden's application to join NATO. Therefore, Ankara's public rhetoric and position on Russian aggression may depend on American Middle East policy and willingness of Washington to restore a fully-fledged military-technical partnership with Türkiye.

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