

# Turkey's Watershed Elections: An Opportunity to Reinvigorate Turkish- EU Ties?

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**DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT** – COMMENTARY

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More than sixty million voters will go to the ballot box to elect a new president and parliament in Turkey on Sunday May 14 and then, if necessary, for a run-off for presidential polls two weeks later, on May 28.

It is a watershed moment in the country's modern history: either President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – the autocrat who has ruled Turkey for two decades – will step aside, or he will keep the helm for another five years, if not longer. The latter will mean that he will continue at an accelerated pace to hollow out Turkey's remaining independent institutions, weaponise the judiciary further to silence critics, and move the country away from Western institutions and architecture. More alarmingly for the international community, Turkey will continue to be an unpredictable,

sometimes disruptive global actor in its ties with NATO, the European Union, and its region.

With only a few days to the polls, the opposition, known as the Nation's Alliance or the "Table of Six", thinks it may have a real chance of defeating Erdoğan. After some feet-shuffling, the six parties have tapped Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, a soft-spoken former bureaucrat who is the polar opposite of Erdoğan's tough-guy persona, as their presidential candidate. Kılıçdaroğlu, whom the acid-tongued Erdoğan once derisively described as "incapable of leading sheep", currently leads the race with two to five points ahead of the incumbent president, according to polls. One poll claims he might win in the first round of the presidential elections on May 14, rather than in the second round.

Kılıçdaroğlu, who campaigns by releasing videos from his modest kitchen to underline the cost-of-living crisis, pledges to restore the parliamentary system, which the executive presidency replaced in 2017; ensure the judiciary's independence; and put an end to practices based on domestic political calculations and ideological approaches in foreign policy. Of Alevi faith, like many of Turkey's Kurds, he has also obtained the support of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party and small leftist platforms - which count for 10% at polls - for his presidential candidacy.

However, it might be too early to write off Erdoğan, a pragmatist capable of dramatic policy changes and larger-than-life gestures at the last minute. He and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) has survived more than a dozen elections, an unsuccessful coup that he blames on US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, a Constitutional Court attempt to close down the party, and many foreign policy and financial crises. Nevertheless, he enters the elections with many chinks in his armour, such as a persistent cost-of-living crisis, skyrocketing inflation which

independent institutions put down to three-digit figures, and public anger over the tardy government response to the devastating Turkish-Syrian earthquakes that killed more than 50,000 people.

## **MEGA-PROJECTS, MEGA-ENEMIES**

Erdoğan's electoral tool-kit includes economic relief to large portions of the population, such as a sizable salary raise to the public sector and an early retirement package to two million Turkish workers. Showcasing recent mega-schemes, such as an electric car project and Turkey's first nuclear power plant built by Russian state-run Rosatom, Erdoğan presents himself as the patriarch who can lead "the century of Turkey". By contrast, he portrays the opposition as a disarrayed and inexperienced group incapable of dealing with the complex economic and geopolitical problems that confront the country. Moreover, he accuses Kılıçdaroğlu's Republican People's Party (CHP) of having ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against Turkey since 1984.

## **AFTER THE POLLS**

There are three main scenarios regarding the outcome of the polls. One is that the opposition claims victory in both parliamentary and presidential elections; the other is that Erdoğan and his conservative-nationalist alliance sweep both presidency and parliament; the third is a split decision that leads to an uneasy cohabitation between the president and parliament and possible early elections.

If Erdoğan wins the presidency but his People's Alliance loses the parliamentary majority, he is expected to rule by decree - as he has done in the last two years. On the other hand, if Kılıçdaroğlu wins the presidency but fails to get a majority in parliament, Erdoğan will likely bide his time, counting on his deputies to block reform and create an impasse that would lead to snap elections.

Whatever the outcome, Turkey has difficult years ahead. The polls will also have ramifications for the country, its region, and the global community, including with the European Union, where Turkey remains a candidate but accession negotiations have stalled since 2016.

Irrespective of who wins the elections, foreign policy will show some degree of change. The grim state of the Turkish economy will force Erdoğan – a master of change – to tone down some of his angry outbursts to create an atmosphere of stability that would lure foreign investors. He has already done so by mending fences with old regional enemies, such as Israel, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In a radical turnabout, Erdoğan attempted to normalise ties with Syria’s Bashar al-Assad to seek a compromise to enable the voluntary return of some of the 3.5 million Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey. Assad, who, like most other Erdoğan foes, is waiting for the result of the elections, maintains Turkey’s withdrawal from Syrian territory is the precondition for normalisation.

Erdoğan has toned down belligerent rhetoric toward the EU and the US on the campaign trail. European-led relief efforts, a donor’s conference in Brussels and high-level visits from Europe to the quake zone breathed some new energy into the stagnant ties. In addition, disaster diplomacy has defused the crisis with Greece, Turkey’s eternal Aegean frenemy. However, it looks unlikely that Turkey and the European Union will go beyond a “transactional relationship” under Erdoğan, who will continue his juggling act between Russia and the Western world if he wins the elections.

## **READY FOR AN OPPOSITION WIN?**

In the case of the opposition win, the foreign policy change will be more radical. Kılıçdaroğlu and his foreign policy team pledge to reinstate the central role of the

foreign ministry in policy-making and reopen Turkey's Ministry of European Union Affairs. This emphasis on restoring the weight of the institutions reflects a major departure from Erdoğan's personalised foreign policy, such as his "private talks" with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin behind closed doors, and support to ideologically preferred political forces, such as Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Moreover, the opposition's clean slate may bring some softening in ties with Washington if the sides can overcome the impasse created by Erdoğan's purchase of Russian S-400s and if Turkey's request to purchase US F-16 fighter jets goes through.

Kılıçdaroğlu's team talks of a reset in Ankara's ties with the EU and other Western institutions, as Turkey revives its adherence to the rule of law and lifts restrictions on freedom of expression and media. The opposition also pledges to release wrongfully-jailed figures, including Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş and philanthropist Osman Kavala, whose continued imprisonment may lead to the suspension of Turkey's membership to the Council of Europe. With Kılıçdaroğlu at the helm, Sweden has a better chance of joining NATO.

Though the opposition signals its commitment to Turkey's European vocation, it knows that chances of reviving - let alone finalising - Turkey's EU accession are slim. So instead, Kılıçdaroğlu talks about modernising the customs union agreement and finalising the visa liberalisation process with the EU member states. Particularly the latter would mean a great deal to Turkish citizens. If Ankara can fulfil the criteria to align Turkey's visa policy with the EU's, especially by changing Turkey's controversial anti-terror laws, the European Commission should not shy away from discussing a concrete roadmap as it has already done with the Western Balkans. Neither should it refrain from reinvigorated political contact between Ankara and Brussels, the revitalisation of institutional bodies such as the Association Council,

and the inclusion of Turkish officials in different informal configurations of the Council.

A new government would not mean the disappearance of policy divergences, such as the question of Cyprus or the Syrian Kurds. Moreover, it may also add to the Syrian refugee problem, as Kılıçdaroğlu has said that he'd review the 2016 Turkey-EU refugee deal, under which the EU provided financial aid to Turkey to reduce the number of refugees coming to Europe. "Europe has to revise its mindset that it has paid money to Turkey and the problem is now solved," he said in a recent video clip.

Still, Turkey-EU platforms for a meaningful dialogue would prevent these from blowing into crises and spilling over to other areas. Cracks in Kılıçdaroğlu's alliance may also occur in terms of the different partner's commitment to the EU and some European policies. For example, one of the parties in the coalition is against Ankara's return to the Istanbul Convention, a pan-European treaty on preventing and combating violence against women, which Erdoğan controversially withdrew from last year.

In the long run, however, a stable relationship with a democratic Turkey geared toward the EU is better for the Union's interest than a "transactional relationship" with an undemocratic and unpredictable partner.

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