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## Turkey's New Presidential Regime: Fragility, Resilience, Reversibility\*\* *Türkiye'nin Yeni Cumhurbaşkanlığı Rejimi: Kırılganlık, Direnç, Tersine Dönebilirlik*

### Abstract

Turkey's forthcoming general election of June 2023 is likely to prove a crucial turning point in the country's political trajectory. Depending on the outcome of the election, Turkey may find itself on the path of democratic renewal or further consolidation or deepening of the existing competitive authoritarian regime. The paper presents a critical account of the last four years under the new presidential regime and tries to locate the Turkish experience in the broader debate on varieties of right-wing populism. A central hypothesis is that the ongoing economic crisis has, to a certain extent, undermined the popularity of the AKP and the governing coalition. At the same time, we should not underestimate the resilience of the ruling coalition in the face of continued economic growth and the importance of additional dynamics such as the role of identity politics and domestic politics-foreign policy interactions.

159

### Öz

2023 Haziran'da gerçekleşecek Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimleri ve Genel Seçimler, Türkiye'nin siyasi gidişatı için çok önemli bir dönüm noktası olma potansiyeline sahip. Türkiye, seçim sonuçlarına bağlı olarak, kendisini demokrasinin yeniden inşa edildiği veya var olan rekabetçi otoriter rejimin daha da konsolide olduğu ve derinleştiği bir senaryoya karşı karşıya bulabilir. Bu makale, yeni başkanlık sistemi altında geçen son dört yılın kritik bir değerlendirmesini yaparken aynı zamanda Türkiye'nin deneyimini genel anlamdaki sağ popülizm tartışmaları çerçevesinde anlamlandırmaya çalışıyor. Ana hipoteze göre devam eden ekonomik kriz, belirli bir ölçüde, AKP'nin ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı'nın halk içerisindeki popülarlığını zayıflattı. Diğer bir taraftan, yönetimdeki koalisyonun ekonomik büyümenin devamlılığını sağlamasıyla beraber kimlik politikaları ve iç politika – dış politika etkileşimi gibi farklı dinamiklerde gösterdiği direnç, seçim öncesi dikkate alınması gereken unsurları oluşturuyor.

### Keywords

Turkey, presidential regime, right-wing populism, crises, identity politics

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Türkiye, başkanlık rejimi, sağ popülizm, krizler, kimlik politikaları

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## Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-the AKP) and its key leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, initially as the Prime Minister and subsequently as the President, have dominated Turkish politics over the past twenty years. The second decade of the AKP has been associated with a process of dramatic democratic backsliding and a steady drift towards a competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> The process of democratic decline, which had already started in the post-2011 period, was accelerated by the transition to a highly centralized presidential regime, which was narrowly endorsed by the referendum of April 2017. The formal transition to the presidential system was accomplished by the June elections. Erdoğan, again by a narrow margin, was elected as the President under the newly instituted regime with significantly expanded executive powers, facilitated by the major constitutional amendments that came into effect following the referendum process. The new presidential regime was fragile from the start in the sense that the AKP, having reached the peak of its electoral success with 50 percent of the vote, was in the process of relative decline. It could generate 43 percent of the vote in June 2018, and it was only with a coalition with the ultra-nationalists, the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-the MHP), that Erdoğan was able to obtain more than 50 percent of the vote needed for appointment as the president under the new system. Turkish public opinion appeared to be highly divided between those who strongly supported Erdoğan and the presidential regime and those who strongly opposed Erdoğan and his new regime, even though the opposition was much more fragmented compared to the degree of unity displayed by the dominant AKP-MHP bloc.

Four years have elapsed since the formal transition to the new presidential regime. The presidential system looks even more fragile, especially due to the dramatic weakening of economic performance in recent years, which has been characterized by a series of currency crises, chronic rates of inflation, high unemployment, and rising inequality. Past economic crises in Turkey had devastating political consequences. Incumbents who were associated with economic crises were typically penalized by either military coups or significant electoral losses. Indeed, political parties, which were associated with a high degree of macroeconomic instability and ensuing crises, were typically wiped out from the political scene.<sup>2</sup> For example, Turgut Özal's Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi-the ANAP) could never recover its electoral success following the chronic inflation of the late 1980s and increasingly became a marginal force in Turkish politics during the 1990s and was effectively eliminated from the political scene in the early 2000s. In a similar fashion, the coalition government responsible for the twin crises of 2000-2001 involved a partnership between The Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, the DSP), the MHP (led by Devlet Bahçeli), and the ANAP (led by Mesut Yılmaz) experienced a similar fate. All three parties experienced severe electoral setbacks in the November 2002 elections. The three coalition partners fell significantly short of achieving the ten percent electoral threshold, which would have allowed them to be represented in Parliament.

Could we expect a similar pattern in the forthcoming elections of June 2023, which many analysts view as an existentialist election? A victory for Erdoğan and the ruling coalition would pave the way for further consolidation of the competitive authoritarian regime, whereas a victory for the opposition bloc would take Turkey on the path of democratic revival. Our central contention is that the kinds of economic crises that Turkey has been experiencing in recent years will indeed undermine the electoral fortunes of the governing coalition and strengthen the chances of victory and enhance the prospects of electoral success on the part of the opposition bloc. The municipal elections of March 2019 have already pointed towards a swing of the pendulum, with the main opposition party, The Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, the CHP), registering striking electoral success in a significant number of major metropolitan centers, including Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir, and, thus, posed a serious challenge to the dominance of the governing coalition. At the same time, it is our contention that one should not underestimate the resilience of the governing coalition in a competitive authoritarian system, where the opposition is trying to compete in a highly uneven and asymmetrical playing field. Economic crises may exert severe costs for incumbents in more democratic environments. Yet, in competitive authoritarian regimes, economic instability and crises, whilst undermining the popularity of the governing party, may not be sufficient to tilt the balance totally in the direction of the opposition. There are other factors to consider, notably the role of identity politics. Hence, even in the midst of a severe economic crisis, there is considerable uncertainty concerning the outcome of the next election. Although public opinion surveys point towards a lead on the part of the opposition bloc, the presence of a significant proportion of undecided voters suggests that the outcome is highly uncertain and rather unpredictable at this point (writing from the vantage point of summer 2022).

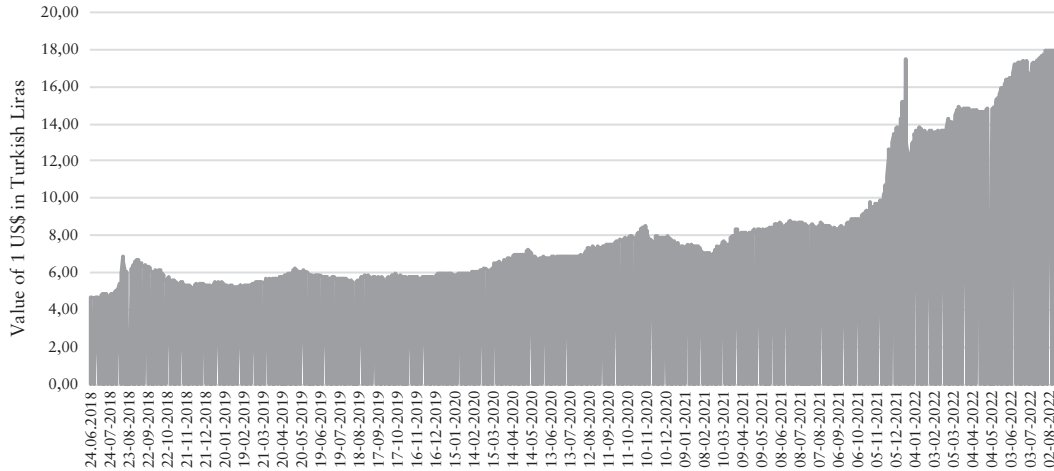
### **Turkey's New Presidential Regime After Four Years: A Balance Sheet**

A cursory examination of a variety of key indicators and relevant international comparisons suggests that the performance of the new presidential regime has been quite dismal. Starting with the economic realm, Turkey experienced a series of currency crises, which started in the summer of 2018 and continued in the fall of 2021. The Turkish Lira has experienced a dramatic decline in its value. As a result, Turkey has experienced a decline in its per capita income in dollar terms, which has been a significant blow to its attempts to break away from the middle-income trap (**Graph 1** and **Graph 2**). At the same time, inflation has sky-rocketed and is approaching three-digit levels. Indeed, there is a possibility that Turkey may be confronted with a serious hyperinflation problem for the first time in its history. A high inflation environment, in turn, has aggravated income inequality. The minimum wage in purchasing power terms has been in decline. The number of people experiencing poverty has been rising. Rising inequality is documented by the fact that the share of wage earners in GDP has declined from 37.85 to 31.5 percent. It is also striking that exceptionally high rates of inflation are accompa-

nied by high rates of unemployment. The unemployment rate, broadly defined, has risen from 16.3 percent in 2018 to 21.7 percent in 2022. The number of unemployed has gone up from 5.5 to 8.1 million during the same period.<sup>3</sup>

**Graph 1**

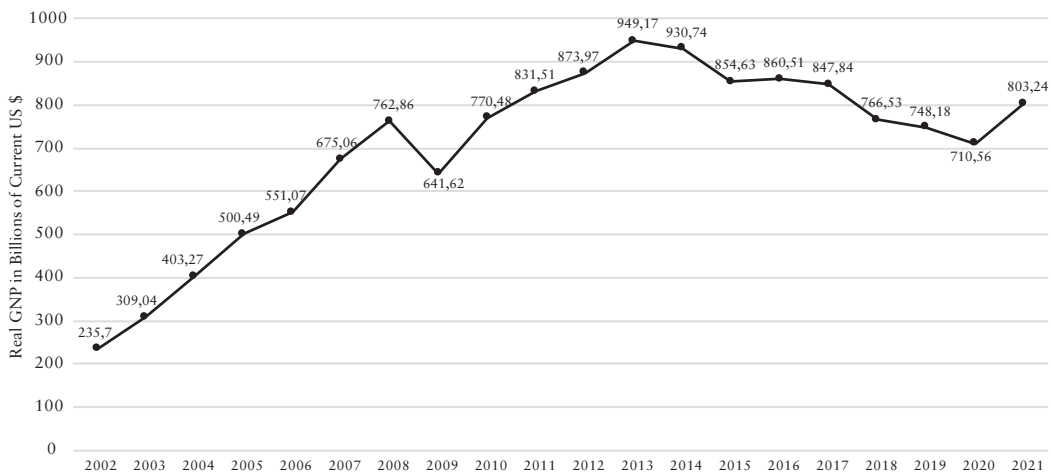
Decline in the Value of Turkish Lira Against the Dollar Since the Presidential System



Source: The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, Retrieved from: [https://evds2.tcmb.gov.tr/index.php?/evds/serie-Market/#collapse\\_2](https://evds2.tcmb.gov.tr/index.php?/evds/serie-Market/#collapse_2)

**Graph 2**

Real GNP in Turkey in Dollar Terms

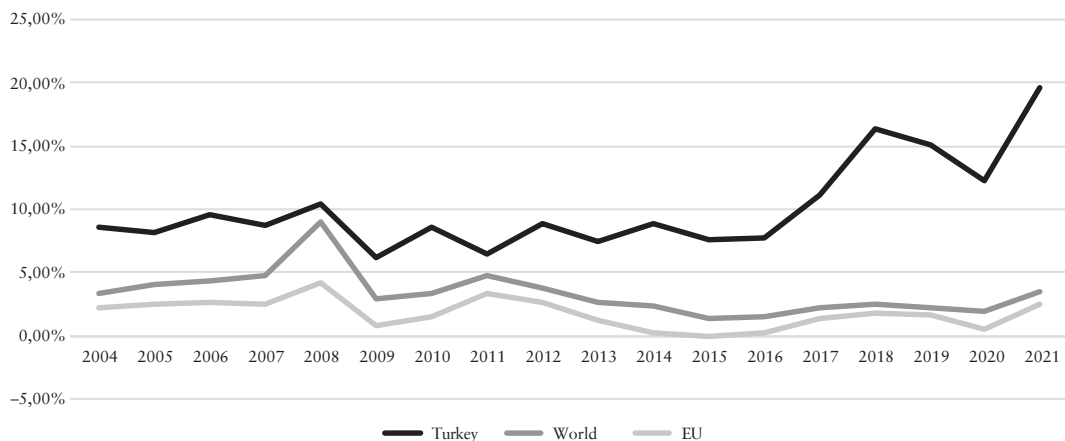


Source: World Bank, Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.MKTP.CD?locations=TR>

Serious economists have clearly pointed out the fact that the strategy of keeping interest rates artificially low in an economy heavily integrated into global financial markets has effectively backfired. It was obvious that successive currency crises, which have contributed to serious inflation by raising the cost of imported inputs (Turkish exports are still heavily dependent on imported inputs) and resulted in a dramatic decline in the country's international reserves, were a home-based phenomenon: The crises were the natural outcome of domestic mismanagement associated with over-centralization and personalization of economic management and weakening of institutional autonomy. Key institutions like the Central Bank effectively lost their autonomy in recent years. Decision-making in such institutions has been increasingly politicized and dictated from above. Successive currency crises and their costly consequences could easily have been avoided by sound monetary and fiscal policy, which would help to keep inflation low and maintain a state of trust and confidence in financial markets. In such an environment, interest rates could be brought down on a stage-by-stage basis as the macroeconomic situation improved. The correct strategy ought to have been to keep inflation under control as a means of lowering interest rates. Instead, trying to push interest rates down by force had the disastrous consequence of causing an unnecessary series of currency crises, with a serious decline in international reserves, which, in turn, have brought Turkey to the verge of an even more serious balance of payments and debt crisis.

### Graph 3

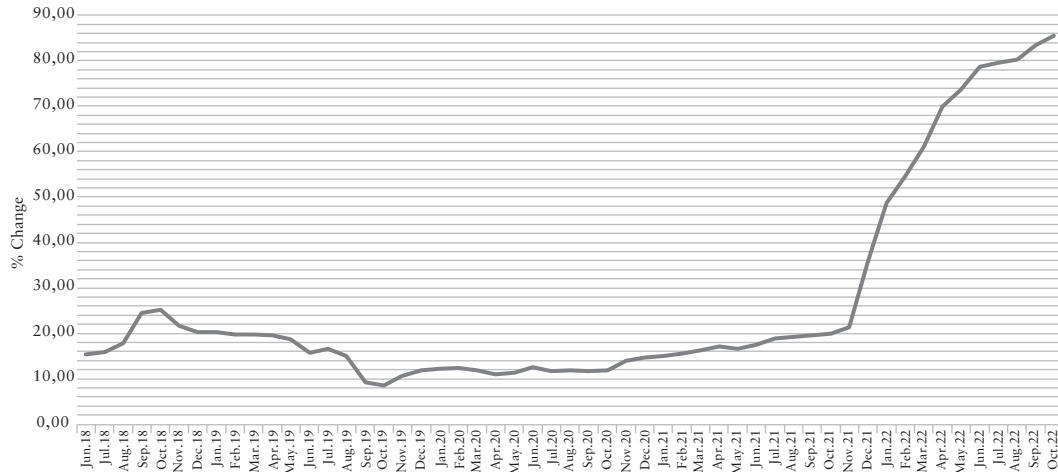
Inflation (Change in Average Consumer Prices) in Comparative Perspective<sup>4</sup>



Source: World Bank, Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=1W-EU-TR>

**Graph 4**

Annual Inflation in Turkey since the Beginning of the Presidential System



Source: Turkstat

During the same period, the degree of centralization of the regime has been strongly institutionalized. The President has increasingly dominated decision-making on key domestic and foreign policy issues. Key institutions such as the Grand National Assembly have been significantly weakened and marginalized in the process. Similar marginalization occurred with respect to key bureaucratic agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which have experienced a serious downgrading in their ability to influence the policy-making process. The process of democratic backsliding continued during this period. The results of the municipal elections of 2019 were overruled in many districts, notably in the Kurdish-majority cities in the South East and Eastern parts of the country, through the appointment of state officials to replace democratically elected representatives. The extent of press and media freedoms continued to decline. It is quite striking that Turkey emerged as 149<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries according to the international press freedom index (Reporters without Borders, 2022). Similar declines were evident in the context of the implementation of the rule of law, which clearly illustrated the dramatic decline of judicial autonomy as one of the central pillars of democratic governance.

Moreover, Turkey failed to conform to the rulings of key institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights and the Constitutional Court on key cases such as the Kavala and Demirtaş cases.<sup>5</sup> Turkey also withdrew from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (popularly known as the Istanbul Convention). This was an important blow in the sense that it provided tacit approval to violence against women, which has reached endemic levels in Turkey in recent years. There have been major failures in the realm of climate change and environmental protection

policies. Although the government finally and reluctantly ratified the Kyoto Protocol (as one of the few remaining countries which had not signed it in the first place), there were clear indications that the environment was not a priority for the government. Mega projects such as the Canal Istanbul have been strongly promoted even though the experts highlighted the huge negative environmental consequences.

The list can certainly be expanded. What is certainly the case is that there is a parallel process of economic mismanagement and a pronounced decline in key democratization indicators, pushing Turkey in the direction of further consolidation of “electoral autocracy” or a competitive authoritarian regime. What is important in the present context is the likely consequences of these pervasive failures. The fact that such failures can easily be documented based on objective criteria does necessarily mean that these failures will be reversed through the electoral process. We should not rule out the possibility of a continuation and further consolidation of the new presidential regime, pushing a large segment of Turkish society into its periphery in the coming years.

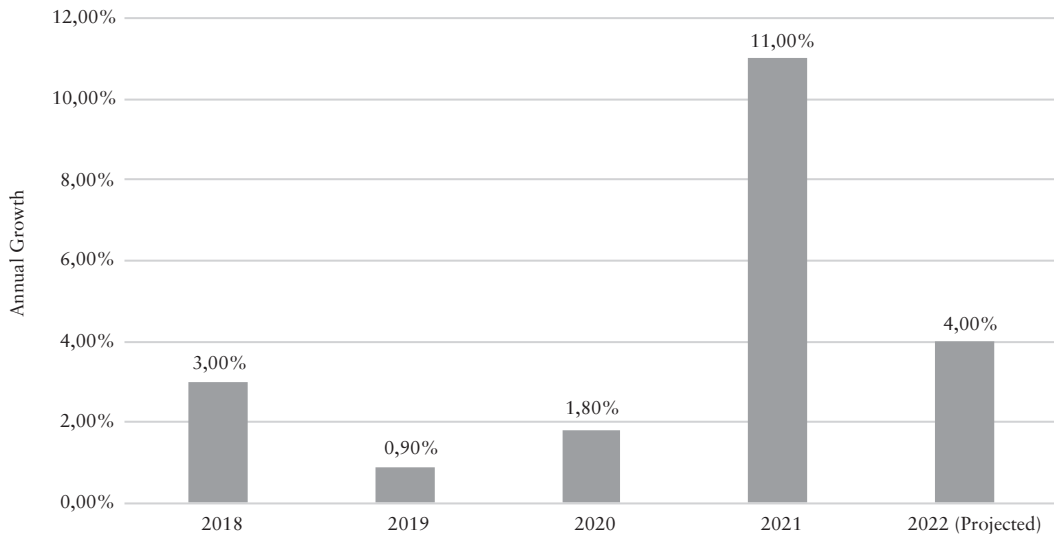
### **Can the Ongoing Economic Crisis Undermine the Presidential Regime?**

Turkey’s ongoing economic crisis has exerted a downward bias on the AKP’s electoral fortunes and the popularity of the presidential regime. However, the degree of resilience displayed in the face of powerful economic shocks and instability should not be underestimated. Several factors at work may explain this resilience. The first important factor to consider concerns the longevity and durability of Erdoğan and the AKP. Over a twenty-year period of AKP rule, a significant coalition of beneficiaries has been created. The winners at the very top include powerful business interests, notably in the construction sector and the media, who have benefited from their close interaction with the president and the political elites. However, the beneficiaries are not confined to the segment at the very top that has gained disproportionately from its interaction with the “party state”. Continuous economic growth has benefited large segments of society through the provision of extensive social assistance programs.<sup>6</sup> A large number of businesses and individuals have also benefited, at varying degrees, from clientelistic networks built up over time. The key segments of society who have benefited over a long period of time from the AKP policies in material terms and their corresponding social status are unlikely to shift their preferences easily in the direction of the opposition parties. It is also important to emphasize that economic growth has continued in an uninterrupted fashion during the new presidential regime, even in the context of the successive wave of currency crises and exceptionally high inflation. The continuity of growth suggests that there are significant winners in this highly unstable environment (especially those with large holdings of a foreign currency or whose contracts are denominated in dollar terms) who will naturally continue to support the existing regime. At the same time, we should not necessarily assume the continuity of growth

is guaranteed on an indefinite basis. Growth in the context of high inflation and depleted international reserves runs the risk of turning into a much bigger balance of payments crisis and collapse of growth, which may hit the AKP's electoral fortunes much more dramatically than is currently the case. The government hopes to avoid such a deep crisis, at least until the elections are safely over, with the assumption that such a crisis can be effectively managed in an environment where its power is safely consolidated. At the same, a major effort is made to win the election at all costs using a variety of social policy interventions, such as large-scale housing programs aimed at lower-income segments of the population and financing them in the short-run by recourse to bilateral deals with friendly governments.

### Graph 5

Real GDP Growth Under the Presidential Regime



Source: IMF, Retrieved from: <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/TUR>

The second factor underlying the resilience of the AKP concerns the mechanisms whereby successive crises have been managed politically. As it is typically the case in all authoritarian populist regimes, “post-truth politics” has also been in action in the Turkish context (Kalaycı, 2022). The regime, with its extensive control over the media, was able to generate a dominant “crisis narrative” whereby blame was shifted to other actors, notably foreign financial interests, speculators, and their domestic counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Economists who seriously criticized the underlying foundations of the economic strategy were classified as “economic terrorists” in the same way that groups, which criticized government policy in other spheres, were described as “terrorists”, acting in close association with external enemies against Turkey’s national interests.



The degree of dominance over media also allowed the regime to project the image that what is happening in Turkey is not a unique phenomenon but part of a broader global problem. This argument became increasingly popular in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as a consequence of which inflation started to increase on a universal basis as a result of energy and food shortages. What is remarkable, however, is how the similarity between the Turkish and Western European contexts has been exaggerated. In Turkey, inflation, according to some recent estimates, has reached triple-digit proportions, whereas, in Europe, it is approaching double-digit levels, pointing towards a huge difference. The way that the crisis has been politically managed through a process of systematic blame shifting away from the government to other actors has not been uniformly effective across the whole of the electorate. Nevertheless, it has been quite effective in maintaining the support of the core group of religious conservatives, who are mostly AKP supporters. In this era, with biased communication processes and weak access to scientific opinion, many citizens continue to complain about the extraordinary increases in the cost of living and the decline in their purchasing power and living standards as a result but tend to dissociate the President and the new regime from any responsibility for causing the problem in the first place. To an outside observer, it may appear to be ironic that the core AKP and Erdoğan supports, which are quite a significant number, are impervious to any kind of rational criticism, such as the disastrous implications of trying to keep interest rates artificially low and using low-interest policy to combat inflation. However, taking into account the information or the misinformation environment that the vast majority of the population (especially those who are less educated and only get information from traditional media resources) find themselves in, the paradoxical situation becomes easily understandable. The pro-government rhetoric in the media represents a clear contradiction with the economic hardships that people experience in their daily lives. From a broader comparative perspective, a key insight to be gained from a cursory examination of the Turkish experience is that competitive authoritarian regimes may prove more resilient than their democratic counterparts in the face of serious economic crises, partly because of their disproportionate ability to manage the information environment in which they operate.

### **Beyond Economics: Bounded Communities, Culture Wars, and Identity Politics**

Material factors are certainly of critical importance for any assessment of the functioning and future prospects of the new presidential regime. Yet, we also need to look beyond purely economic factors and consider the realm of identity politics. It is through an excursion into the realm of identity politics that we are able to understand the type of influences that may render the regime resilient even in the context of adverse economic circumstances. The polarized nature of Turkish politics and the presence of “bounded communities” – that is, socio-political groups voting based on their identities rather than material cleavages – created

a tripartite societal division between secular Kemalists, religious conservatives, and the Kurds (Öniş 2015). The existence of “bounded communities” or “tribalism” has been a perennial feature of Turkish politics and constituted a key constraint on Turkey’s long-term democratic development (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012)

Erdoğan, during the later years of the AKP, took advantage of these bounded communities and tried to govern through a process of intensifying the degree of polarization that existed in Turkish society. According to his vision, Sunni-Muslim nationalism constituted the dominant core; –secular Kemalists and Kurds–, were considered to be outside the mainstream of Turkish politics. Erdoğan is certainly not unique in this respect. He is among the right-wing populist leaders who have employed polarizing identity politics effectively in their respective national contexts. Governing through polarization and intensification of long-standing conflicts over religious or ethnic identity allowed such leaders to build up and consolidate political support. One of the key benefits in this context was the ability to generate a strong cross-class coalition, bringing together people at different points of the income and wealth spectrum as a basis for building and sustaining majorities through the ballot box. Victor Orban’s “Christian nationalism” in Hungary and Narendra Modi’s “Hindu nationalism” in India are striking examples of this type of political strategy, which closely resemble the recent Turkish context. The narrow, majoritarian understanding of democracy embodied in this mindset inevitably involved significant repression of “outsiders”, the other half of the divided society, who were left of this vision of exclusionary, polarizing identity politics.

The key point to emphasize in the present context is that a significant share of the population, around 30 percent of the electorate, would continue to vote for the AKP because of their conservative-religious identity. This is also a perennial problem for the main opposition party, the CHP, which historically finds it difficult to make inroads into conservative (as well as Kurdish) segments of Turkish society. There is no doubt that the position of conservative religious segments has improved both in material terms and in terms of their status in Turkish society over the twenty years of the AKP rule. Religious conservatives have undoubtedly prospered in material terms from their organic links to the AKP, which progressively turned from a majority party to a hegemonic party and ultimately to a party state. In cultural terms, the weight of religious education and the emphasis on Islamic values have expanded considerably during the past twenty years. Consequently, it would be hard to imagine a major shift of the bulk of the AKP support, deeply rooted in religious conservatism, to shift away from the party, barring perhaps a major catastrophe. The AKP leadership has been keen to maintain the support of religious conservatives and has taken several steps in their direction. One of the important symbolic moves in recent years has been to convert Hagia Sophia (an iconic museum representing different religious traditions) into a mosque. Although this move created a certain degree of resentment in Western capitals, it was welcomed as a positive development by large segments of the Turkish public. The leadership has also made ample use of the existentialist threat conservative segments of Turkish society would face if the AKP were to lose its power

and the secular elites were able to reclaim their previous dominance. Frequent references have been made to military coups in the past and their costly consequences, notably for the conservative segments of Turkish society in this context.

This brings us perhaps to the critical dimension of identity politics in the context, namely the identity of the leader himself. Even staunch critics would acknowledge that Erdoğan has been an extraordinarily successful leader. His charismatic leadership style and appeal to large segments of the public, combined with his ability to forge effective coalitions (most recently with the ultra-nationalist party, the MHP) and to practice polarizing identity politics, have all contributed to his extraordinary electoral success and durability. He has also been highly successful in fragmenting the opposition both in his own party and across the political spectrum. Here lies a paradox. Erdoğan's personal popularity continues to be an important contributor to the resilience of his party's electoral strength and his ability to accomplish his major project of a highly centralized presidential regime.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Erdoğan's presence at the top of the political spectrum points toward the inherent fragility of the regime. Indeed, in recent years, the regime has become so personalized that the party itself has been pushed into slides. In the early years of the AKP, Erdoğan was an important figure. However, several other individuals, such as Abdullah Gül, Ali Babacan, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, among others, had also played an important role in key areas such as the economy and foreign policy. In recent years, the personalistic rule of Erdoğan has been consolidated as a large number of key AKP figures of the earlier era have been pushed to the sidelines. It is interesting that key AKP figures such as Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had been firm supporters of Erdoğan in the past, have now become active members of the opposition bloc, offering strong critiques of Erdoğan's performance in domestic politics and the economy. What is also striking is that the durability of the regime depends on a single person. There is no natural successor for Erdoğan in sight, and it would be hard to imagine an alternative political figure to maintain the coherence of AKP in the post-Erdoğan era in the absence of its charismatic leader.

### **The Importance of the International Context and the Role of Foreign Policy**

The monopolization of Turkey's political center by Erdoğan and the AKP under the new presidential regime was also facilitated by a conducive international environment. The past decade has witnessed a dramatic decline in the fortunes of liberal democracy on a worldwide basis. Established democracies experienced a process of democratic erosion and populist backlashes, which reduced their ability to serve as role models for the rest of the world. Powerful global shifts have resulted in the emergence of alternative models of authoritarian capitalism associated with the rise of China and the return of Russia to the global political scene. The phenomenal success of China projected an alternative model of development based on the idea that successful capitalism could be achieved under a highly centralized authoritarian system of

governance. Many “hybrid” or “in-between” regimes during this period experienced a process of serious backsliding, as the recent experiences of India under Narendra Modi and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro clearly testify (Kutlay and Öniş 2022).

“The Age of the Strongmen” constitutes an apt term to characterize the past decade.<sup>9</sup> Powerful nationalist-populist leaders have emerged in many different parts of the world. These leaders like Trump, Orban, Modi, and Bolsonaro shared a common vision in their domestic politics and foreign policy. Erdoğan is, in fact, one of the most striking examples of such leaders. Indeed, he has been the most durable among these leaders in comparative terms. A common feature of right-wing populist leaders has been their highly proactive and assertive foreign policies, which have, in retrospect, paid handsome dividends in terms of bolstering their popularity on the domestic front.

International factors alone cannot singlehandedly determine developments in domestic politics. Yet, the interplay of domestic and international factors is important in the present Turkish context. The emerging post-Western international order and the challenges that liberal democracy has been experiencing on a worldwide basis have clearly been working in the direction of Erdoğan’s favor. In retrospect, it is possible to identify several dimensions in Erdoğan’s foreign policy style that have contributed to his domestic popularity.

A key element of the foreign policy approach was the idea of building up a “strong Turkey”, which would not be submissive to the West, but would play an important role in contributing to shaping a new international order where the “global South” or non-Western Powers would play a critical role. According to this vision, a strong and independent Turkey would maintain transactional relations with the West but would increasingly forge strong links with non-Western powers like Russia and China as well as taking part actively in multiple geographies ranging from the Middle East to Eurasia and Africa as an important regional and global power. The self-conception of Turkey was not confined to the realm of significant middle power. The image of a country, which had global significance, grounded in its strong imperial legacies, was projected to the domestic audience and the rest of the world. Arguably, the strongest effect of this self-image of a strong Turkey as a global power was in the realm of domestic politics. Indeed, the strong nationalist sentiments projected by Erdoğan and the AKP elites were shared by large segments of the electorate, which included key segments of the opposition.<sup>10</sup>

Erdoğan’s foreign policy vision was based on strong anti-Western sentiments. He effectively capitalized on the humiliations that Turkey had experienced in the context of the EU membership process during the previous decades. The notorious failed coup attempt of July 2016 was also attributed, in part, to Western powers, notably to the United States. Furthermore, key Western states were accused of their lack of sensitivity to Turkey’s security concerns, notably in relation to the militant and secessionist Kurdish movement associated with the PKK and its extensions in Syria (PYD). Whilst Turkey’s security concerns were legitimate, they also were effectively utilized to generate an increasingly aggressive and coercive

foreign policy, with extensive military activism beyond the country's borders. Such military activism appeared to generate broad consent and popularity for the regime. It is also striking that the use of Turkish-made drones, one of the key successes of Turkey's defense industry, which seemed to play a decisive role in several regional and international conflicts, attracted widespread attention and approval in the sphere of Turkish domestic politics. Security concerns were also effectively used to weaken and fragment the opposition. Individuals or political entities who took a different from the government on key security challenges were often accused of siding with terrorists. In this kind of environment, any criticisms originating from the US or the EU, which pointed toward Turkey's weakening democratic credentials and human rights record, effectively backfired. Such attempts on the part of key Western actors were interpreted as interference in Turkey's domestic politics. Ironically, Erdoğan's domestic popularity was strengthened by such moves given the extent of the anti-Western sentiments, which have developed and have been nurtured in recent years, both on the right and the left of the political spectrum.

More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine appears to have worked in favor of Erdoğan and seems to have played (at last so far in the summer of 2022) an important role in terms of shielding the presidential regime from the negative effects of an ongoing economic crisis. During the early months of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Erdoğan effectively placed himself in a neutral position, capitalizing from its insider position as a NATO member, on the one hand, and the strong relations that Turkey had developed both with Russia and Ukraine over the years. Turkey's position in the War was interesting and paradoxical. Although the War itself was condemned (and a plea was made for a rapid end to the conflict), there was no attempt, in stark contrast to the position taken in the West, to implicate and condemn Putin for initiating the War in the first place. This "neutral" position appears to have worked both in terms of a certain recovery in Erdoğan's position on the domestic front and promoting Erdoğan's image globally as an international statesman and a key mediating actor on a global scale. Indeed, Erdoğan has played an instrumental role in the signing of an International Grain Agreement, which would allow a "grain corridor" for shipping grain exports from Ukraine and Russia to the Middle East and Africa. This could be regarded as a significant achievement, especially in terms of helping to alleviate a global food crisis. Erdoğan used his diplomatic skills quite effectively to persuade Putin to lift the embargo on Ukrainian exports of grain, a move that was well-received by the international community. Another important implication of the Russia-Ukraine War is that Western actors have become more tolerant of domestic political repression. Although Turkey has been an outlier in NATO and the Western Alliance in recent years, Western actors have clearly decided not to push too hard on Turkey's domestic politics because of their growing concern with their own security. Rather paradoxically, the growing competition between the Transatlantic Alliance and Russia, not to lose Turkey as a key ally, appears to have generated greater space for autonomous action for Erdoğan and his political allies in Turkey's domestic politics.

## **Possibilities of Democratic Revival: Can the Opposition Emerge as a Winner?**

Our analysis so far indicates that the opposition in Turkey, which would play a key role in Turkey's democratic revival, faces a difficult task. It is confronted with a highly uneven playing field. The government has disproportionate control over the media, the judiciary, and security forces in a competitive authoritarian regime. There is a strong tendency on the part of the government to discredit and de-legitimize the opposition, classifying them as "terrorists", acting in close cooperation with the enemies of the state, both domestic and external. From the perspective of the regime, the opposition can only have a legitimate role if it agrees with all aspects of government policy and refrains from active criticism. Any serious criticism of domestic economic policy or foreign policy is interpreted as siding with outside agents and acting against national interest. The logic of treating all aspects of opposition as a security threat to the state has some resemblance to Putin's Russia, although the degree of central control exercised by Putin is far greater than the comparatively more recent and fragile presidential regime in Turkey. Yet another problem is that whilst the governing bloc of the AKP and the MHP are united under a single umbrella and dominated by a single individual, the opposition is fragmented and represented by several parties and individuals of diverse ideological orientations.

172

In spite of these adverse trends, there are reasons to believe that the opposition has a serious possibility of winning in next year's elections, although the outcome of the elections is far certain from the perspective of summer 2022. There following trends raise considerable optimism concerning the electoral fortunes of the united opposition front. The first element of optimism is clearly related to the electoral success of the CHP majors in the local elections of March 2019, shortly after the transition to the presidential system in June 2018.<sup>11</sup> One of the key results of the local elections involved the emergence of new political actors on the scene, such as Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mansur Yavaş, and Tunç Soyer, as the new mayors of the three largest metropolitan centers, Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir respectively. The dramatic nature of this result is highlighted by the fact that Istanbul and Ankara have been under the control of the AKP for nearly two decades. In fact, the main opposition party, the CHP, was able to win 11 significant metropolitan centers in close cooperation with other opposition parties. The HDP, the main representative of the Kurdish vote, also supported the opposition and played a key role in Imamoğlu's victory in the repeated election of June 2019. What is significant is that these actors represented a new vision of pluralism with an emphasis on the inclusive provision of public service regardless of ethnic and religious identity. Their style of politics differed sharply from the divisive, confrontational, and exclusionary identity politics that Erdoğan and the AKP leadership have been practicing in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

The second major element concerns efforts on the part of the main opposition party, the CHP, and its key leader in broadening the party's electoral coalition by actively trying to break down the pervasive "bounded communities" problem in Turkish actively through a proactive

strategy of reaching out to conservative and Kurdish segments of Turkish society. This is an important initiative in the sense that it represents a radically different and inclusionary style of politics practiced by the dominant actors in the regime. In practical terms, it is also a winning strategy, in the sense that the CHP alone, on the basis of its traditional secular-Kemalist electorate and strong base of support in major metropolitan areas and Western coastal regions of Turkey, is unable to generate more than a quarter of the total vote.

The third and closely related element concerns the process of active cooperation established by the six opposition parties, a process in which Kılıçdaroğlu again has been an active political figure. Following Kılıçdaroğlu, the second most important actor in the opposition bloc is the leader of the Good Party (İyi Parti-the IP), Meral Akşener. Akşener is the only woman leader on the opposition front. She has a significant appeal to the center-right electorate, which has been disillusioned with the AKP's policies. The groups that Akşener has a particular appeal to are the more educated and urbanized moderate conservatives and nationalist voters. Akşener has also acted as a proactive figure in forging and maintaining the coalition of opposing parties.

Coalition politics in Turkey has an unhappy history. Periods of coalition governments, notably during the 1970s and the 1990s, have been associated with considerable economic and political instability. The wide ideological distance between parties on the left and right of the political spectrum, as well as the absence of a compromised culture on the part of key political parties, effectively eliminated the possibility of workable coalition governments. Indeed, in recent years Erdoğan has effectively capitalized on this unhappy history of coalition politics in Turkey, arguing that a highly centralized presidential regime constitutes a key to unity, stability, and effective governance, which sharply differs from the weak and fragmented coalition governments that Turkey had encountered in the past.

However, for the first time, there is a possibility that coalition politics may work in the Turkish context. The active search for unity on the part of the six opposition parties represents a major step in this context. The six parties are –in addition to the two major constituents of the bloc– the CHP, on the left of the political spectrum and the IP on the right of the center of the political spectrum, four other parties on the right, which include The Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi-The DEVA) led by Ali Babacan, The Future Party (Gelecek Partisi-The GP) led by Ahmet Davutoğlu, The Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi-The SP) led by Temel Karamollaoğlu and The Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti-The DP) led by Gültekin Uysal. The initiative involving a systematic unification of the opposition bloc, symbolized as the initiative to bring the six parties together at the same table (popularly known as “altılı masa”), had its first formal meeting in October 2021. Several meetings have taken place subsequently. The unifying element that brought the six parties of different ideological persuasions to the same table was their opposition to the authoritarian presidential regime and their strong commitment to replace this regime with a “strengthened parliamentary system”

(involving the creation of strong independent institutions with a high degree of accountability and a system of powerful checks and balance mechanism to constrain executive power).

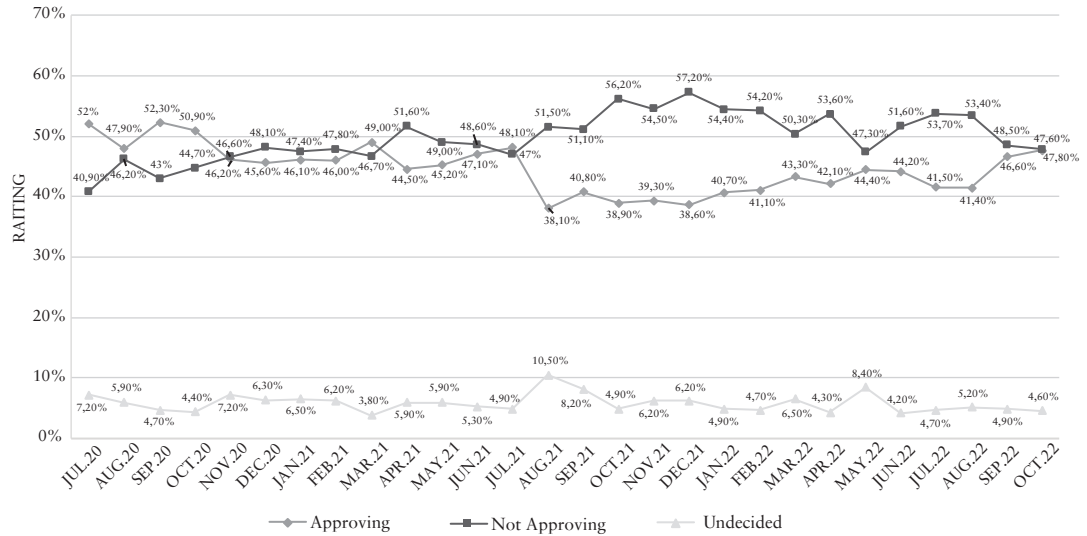
The degree of unity displayed so far has been quite impressive, and if they are able to maintain their unity and win the presidential election as a bloc, this will be a result of major historical significance. Yet, one has to recognize that the opposition bloc faces formidable challenges in the process. The government is using every opportunity at its disposal to fragment and weaken the opposition bloc. A striking example of this in November 2022 involved Erdoğan's proactive moves to pull the IP away from the coalition by inviting the party to be part of their electoral coalition with the MHP. However, rather strikingly, the IP leader Akşener openly rejected the offer, which clearly highlighted the unity of the opposition bloc.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, major attempts were made to discredit key mayors like İmamoğlu and Yavaş by using the powers of the central government to limit their activities and restrict their ability to provide public services.<sup>14</sup> The different position of the various parties involved towards the Kurdish Party - the HDP, also constitutes a problem. The CHP has been more willing, as has been the case in the past, to enter an electoral coalition with the HDP, whilst parties on the right, such as the Good Party with their strong nationalist orientation, firmly distance themselves from the HDP. Fortunately, a possible conflict has been avoided so far by leaving the HDP outside the formal opposition bloc. It is highly likely that most Kurdish citizens will vote in favor of the opposition and against the presidential regime, even though their party is not formally integrated into the main opposition bloc.

Recent opinion polls are quite striking in the sense that they point towards a possible electoral victory by the opposition. It is also striking that under different scenarios concerning the choice of the presidential candidate from the opposition bloc, the results appear to be broadly similar, pointing towards a victory on the part of the opposition candidate (**Graph 6** and **Graph 7**). Yet, a major qualification is called for in the sense that there are sizeable groups of "undecided" swing voters who may play a significant role in shifting the balance in either direction (**Graph 6** and **Graph 7**). A critical element in this context is the entry of first-time voters onto the political scene. It is estimated that 6.5 million young voters will take part in the next election, and they could well exert a significant influence on the outcome. Survey results also indicate that the choice of the presidential candidate on the part of the opposition (which has not been announced so far) may have a crucial bearing on the outcome of the elections. The two leading Mayors, Yavaş and İmamoğlu, seem to enjoy broader popularity compared to Kılıçdaroğlu, who currently stands out as the individual with a major ambition to emerge as a presidential candidate (**Graph 7**). Despite the loss of support for Erdoğan in the last two years, he has managed to reverse part of the decline in his popularity among the voters during the final phase of 2022 due to two main influences (**Graph 6**). Increasing foreign policy activism of Turkey and Erdoğan's appearance as an effective mediator between Russia and Ukraine, notably through the accomplishment of the Grain Corridor initiative, received strong endorsement and bolstered electoral support from domestic constituencies. Additionally, although the unity



**Graph 6**

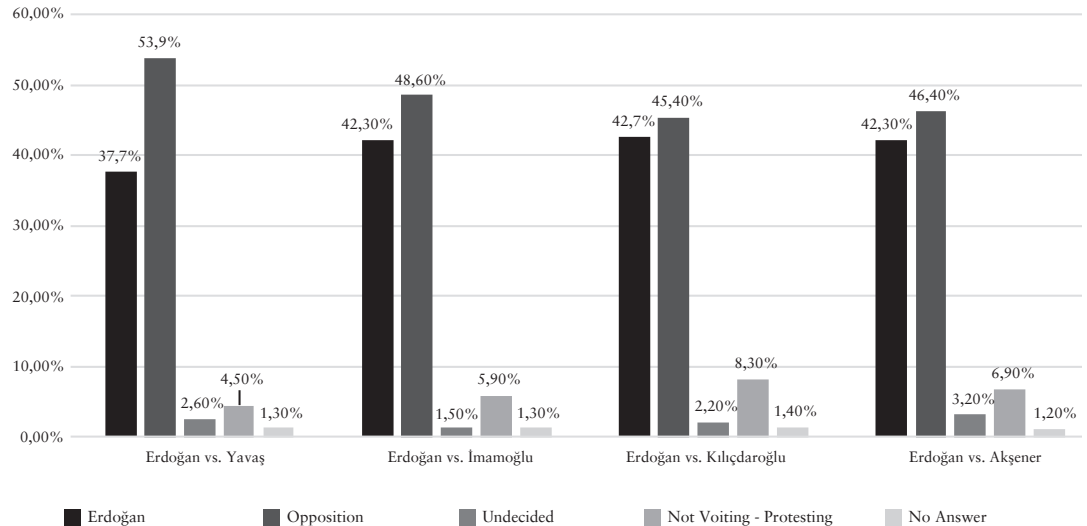
President Erdoğan's Approval Ratings, Survey Results (July 2020-October 2022)



Source: MetroPoll Stratejik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar, Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/metropoll/status/1552580790424408064/photo/2>

**Graph 7**

Presidential Elections Survey Results (Second Round, July 2022)



Source: MetroPoll Stratejik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar, Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/metropoll/status/1552580790424408064/photo/2>

of the opposition bloc was maintained in spite of serious pressures exerted by the government, the delays in announcing a leader and, notably, the failure to agree upon a leader with a charismatic style and widespread appeal could tilt the balance against the opposition bloc. In spite of these reservations, the latest developments (November 2022) could not break down the continuous lead of possible opposition candidates displayed in survey results.

## **Conclusions and Scenarios for the Future**

The balance sheet of Turkey's new presidential regime has been highly unsatisfactory. Turkey's democratic backsliding, one of the most striking cases of authoritarian reversal among emerging powers, continued during the authoritarian regime. The growing authoritarianism of the regime failed to produce a Chinese-style technocratic government. In the absence of a rule-based system and the absence of checks and balance mechanisms, the economic performance of Turkey has steadily degenerated. What emerged is increasingly a perverse form of state capitalism where economic rewards were increasingly based on access to the state and favors by the party state. After many years of economic stability, Turkey started to experience successive currency crises and chronic rates of inflation, which were largely the outcome of domestic management. In Hirschman's "exit, voice and loyalty" framework (Hirschman, 1970), the best option was "loyalty". "Loyalty" to the regime created material benefits and rising status. "Voice", meaning overt criticism of the regime, is quite costly both for businesses as well as individual citizens as it would involve reactions by the state and penalties imposed, leading to exclusion from state favors. In such an environment, the third option, "exit", became a popular option. Large numbers of young people, who were increasingly alienated, chose the option of migrating out of the country. Significant brain drain has become a serious problem in recent years.

Hence, the forthcoming elections represent a critical juncture in Turkey's political history. This particular election, more than other elections in the country's history, is of existentialist importance. A victory for Erdoğan and the ruling coalition would mean that the competitive authoritarian regime would be consolidated further, making a reversal in the future increasingly less likely. In foreign policy terms, an Erdoğan victory would mean a further shift away from the West toward the authoritarian Russia-China axis. A victory for the alliance of the opposition parties, on the other hand, would have a dramatic impact in terms of turning the tide away from authoritarianism to a democratic direction. Evidence-based survey data points towards a 10-15 percent decline in the popularity of the AKP during the recent era. The chances of an opposition victory are significant but by no means inevitable. There are important factors such as the nature of identity politics, Erdoğan's personal charisma and his continued appeal to significant segments of the electorate, and the role that foreign policy and external context perform in generating consent for the presidential regime, which may still tilt the balance in the direction of the governing coalition.

Even if the opposition were able to win the elections, the task of reconstruction would be quite formidable. The experience of the United States is quite telling. Even though Trump might have lost the November 2020 elections, the legacy of Trumpism lives on. It may well be the case that Trump or another figure in a similar vein could win the next presidential elections. The presidential regime has aggravated the deep-seated divisions in Turkish society both in economic and identity terms. The task of the opposition, if they are able to win the election, will be to try to address the fundamental problem of a divided Turkey. Inclusionary identity politics will be crucial in dealing with problems of polarization and overcoming bounded identities through a process of building bridges between different segments of Turkish society. Deep-seated economic reforms, effective macroeconomic governance, and redistributive strategies would need to be implemented to generate a new path of stable and egalitarian economic growth.

- 1 On Turkey's democratic decline in the second half of the AKP era and the emergence of a competitive authoritarian regime under the guise of the new presidential system, see Esen and Gümüşçü (2018, 2020), Bechev (2022) and Yilmaz and Bashirov (2019). For valuable attempts to place the Turkish experience into comparative perspective, see Selçuk (2016) and Boyunsuz (2016).
- 2 For an important empirical analysis, which demonstrates the strong linkage in the Turkish context between economic failures of incumbent governments and political outcomes, see Akarca and Tansel (2006).
- 3 On the performance of Turkish presidential regime and its contribution to endemic governance failures, endemic macroeconomic instability and currency crises, see Öniş and Kutlay (2021). For a vivid account of the currency crises, which unfolded during Fall 2021, see Şenses (2022).
- 4 Official inflation rates seriously underrepresent the true inflation rates in Turkey. Inflation Research Group (ENAGroup), which is formed by independent economists and social scientists, calculated the last 12 months increase rate in ENAGroup Consumer Price Index (E-CPI) as 176.04%, whereas the Central Bank declared the same value as 79.60%. For a detailed account see the following news report in BBC News Turkey: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c72z4z24k96o>
- 5 See Pierini (2019) for a European perspective on the pronounced decline of the rule of law in Turkey and the failure to comply with the EU standards.
- 6 For a good discussion of the role of housing policy as an example of successful coalition building in the AKP era, see Arslanalp (2018).
- 7 For a broad analysis, which illustrates how populist leaders effectively distort information through the media and the public sphere to their electoral disadvantage, see Kryzanowski and Ekstöm (2022). The article also serves as an introduction to the special issue of *Discourse and Society* on this topic.
- 8 On the importance of Erdoğan and the leadership cult in shaping the nature of Turkish politics in recent years, see Bechev (2022), Smith (2019), Yilmaz and Bashirov (2019).
- 9 For the emergence of right-wing nationalist-populist leaders or "strongmen" during the past decade and the underlying dynamics of this process, see Rachman (2022) and Öniş and Kutlay (2020).
- 10 On the nature of dramatic shifts in Turkish foreign policy during the second decade of the AKP and the role of Erdoğan in shaping Turkish foreign policy, see Kutlay and Öniş (2021) and Bechev (2022).
- 11 The electoral success of the main opposition party, the CHP at the subnational level in 2019 has been widely documented. See, in particular, Esen and Gümüşçü (2019), Demiralp and Balta (2021).
- 12 For a valuable analysis, pointing to Turkey as a possible role model in terms of defeating populists in general, see Wutrich and Imbelby (2020), Gürpınar (2022), Demiralp and Balta (2021).

- 13 The piece on Erdoğan's invitation and Akşener's rejection: <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/11/17/erdoganin-altili-masadan-kalk-cagrisina-aksenerden-rest>
- 14 See Öktem (2021) for an analysis of the difficult faced by local authorities in key metropolitan centers after 2019, due to strong pressures exerted and the constraints imposed by the presidential regime.

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