

## Turkish society on the threshold of a third decade of Erdoğan's rule

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The victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the presidential and parliamentary elections held in May 2023 marked the beginning of a third decade of uninterrupted rule for him (first as prime minister and then as president). This electoral success was possible not only due to the advantages offered by his control of the centralised state apparatus, but also due to significant popular support and his ability to skilfully take advantage of the opposition's weakness. Since the AKP took power in 2002, Turkish society has undergone profound changes. These were linked, among other things, to a significant increase in the standard of living of citizens. However, the Turkish population has been affected by the consequences of a defunct state development model and a mounting economic crisis, combined with internal tensions caused by polarisation and the influx of immigrants. Despite this, the AKP continues to successfully manage public sentiment, skilfully use issues related to the outlook on life in public debate, and positions itself as the guarantor of the state's security and stability. It seems that in the near future the public will have limited prospects to actively influence political change in Turkey because there is no viable alternative to the ruling camp and the system is repressive in nature. Since mass protests seem unlikely, a transition in Turkish politics may only occur when President Erdoğan withdraws from it.

### Two decades of reconstruction

For the last 20 years, the Turkish state has undergone dynamic changes in all aspects. The social aspect is most important for understanding contemporary Turkey and forecasting its future development paths.

The Turkish population's standard of living has increased significantly over the past two decades. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), Turkey is a highly developed country and is ranked 48th in the world in this respect, higher than some EU countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. In 2002, Turkey was considered to be a medium-developed country and ranked 85th in the ranking. Over the last 20 years, Turkish citizens' life expectancy has increased from 72.6 to 76 years.<sup>1</sup> At present, Turks are also much better educated. The government has managed to almost completely eradicate illiteracy and, between 2004 and 2019, the literacy rate rose from 87% to 97%.<sup>2</sup> Secondary and higher education has become more widespread, including outside the biggest cities, although sometimes

<sup>1</sup> 'Human Development Reports: Türkiye', United Nations Development Programme, 8 September 2022, [hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org).

<sup>2</sup> 'Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) – Türkiye', The World Bank, 19 September 2023, [data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org).



the quality of education is dubious. In 2022, 23.9% of individuals aged 25 and older were university graduates and 47.1% secondary school graduates. Compared with 2008, this shows an increase of 14.1 and 20.6 percentage points respectively.<sup>3</sup> Urbanisation is another symbol of Turkey's modernisation. This process began back in the 1980s and has accelerated in the 21st century. Between 2002 and 2022, the proportion of Turkish people living in urban areas increased from 66% to 77%.<sup>4</sup> That period saw a major increase in the number of residents of Turkey's largest cities (Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir) and regional hubs such as Şanlıurfa and Antalya.

In addition, contemporary Turkey is now more affluent than it was at the beginning of the 21st century. Between 2002 and 2022, its GDP per capita at purchasing power parity increased from \$9,300 to \$37,300.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, it continues to be marked by huge social contrasts. Over the past two decades, it has failed to alleviate these inequalities. Their scale has remained almost unchanged for years (0.415 according to the Gini coefficient), which places Turkey among those OECD countries which are characterised by the greatest scale of inequalities, alongside Mexico and Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup>

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Turkey's demography is another indicator of social change. Since 2002, its population has increased from 66 mn to 85 mn.<sup>7</sup> Turkish society is young. In 2022, its median age was just 33.5 years and as much as 22% of the population were children aged 14 and younger.<sup>8</sup> The significant increase in population was a consequence of the previous birth rate dynamics.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, statistics indicate that Turkey's fertility rate has declined and no longer ensures a steady birth rate. Against this backdrop, the ethnically non-Turkish south-eastern part of the country is an exception because it has a much higher birth rate.<sup>10</sup>

However, most importantly, Turkey, which is a relatively stable and prosperous country compared with the rest of the region, has become a host country for large numbers of refugees and migrants. The outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 marked the beginning of this profound demographic transition. According to the Presidency of Migration Management, at present 3.25 mn Syrian nationals are in Turkey with temporary protection.<sup>11</sup> In addition, more than 238,000 Syrians have been granted Turkish citizenship.<sup>12</sup> This entails a change in the country's ethnic composition. For the first time since the founding of the republic, Turkey has a significant Arab minority which mainly inhabits the south-eastern part of the country (Hatay, Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep provinces) and Istanbul. Turkey is also an attractive destination for migrants from the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia and Africa. In November 2023, the total number of foreigners residing in Turkey was 4.6 mn, which accounts for 5.44% of the population. These are official statistics which do not take into account illegal immigrants and unregistered individuals.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'National Education Statistics, 2022', Turkstat, 26 May 2023, data.tuik.gov.tr.

<sup>4</sup> 'Urban population (% of total population) – Türkiye', The World Bank, data.worldbank.org.

<sup>5</sup> 'GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$) – Türkiye', The World Bank, data.worldbank.org.

<sup>6</sup> 'Income inequality', OECD, data.oecd.org.

<sup>7</sup> 'Population – Türkiye', The World Bank, data.worldbank.org.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Results of Address Based Population Registration System, 2022', Turkstat, 6 February 2023, data.tuik.gov.tr.

<sup>9</sup> In 1972, Turkey's population was 37 mn, in 1982 it was 45 mn, in 1992 it was 56 mn, and in 2002 it was 66 mn.

<sup>10</sup> 'Birth Statistics, 2022', Turkstat, 15 May 2023, data.tuik.gov.tr.

<sup>11</sup> 'Temporary protection', Presidency of Migration Management, 30 November 2023, en.goc.gov.tr.

<sup>12</sup> 'İçişleri Bakanı Yerlikaya, Türk vatandaşları olan Suriyelilerin sayısının 238 bine yaklaştığını açıkladı', BBC News Türkçe, 9 November 2023, bbc.com/turkce.

<sup>13</sup> F. Sevinç Çetin, Y. Kalyoncuoğlu, 'Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı'ndan, Türkiye'deki göçmen sayısına ilişkin açıklama', Anadolu Ajansı, 16 July 2023, aa.com.tr.

## The crisis of the AKP model

In connection with the centenary celebrations of the founding of the republic (29 October 2023), the ruling camp enthusiastically presented the achievements of its two-decade rule, in particular infrastructure investments and social welfare programmes. On this occasion, a commemorative slogan was coined: “We have done a century’s worth of work in twenty years”.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to this ostentatious optimism, the current social situation in Turkey is ambiguous. Rapid modernisation and improved living conditions have awakened aspirations which are increasingly difficult to fulfil. Alongside this, the former model of economic and social development based on foreign investment and the construction sector has been exhausted.

The present prolonged economic crisis, which has been ongoing since around 2018, is the most acute problem, as it has affected public finances and resulted in

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a major hike in the cost of living. The lower and middle classes are grappling with the devaluation of the lira and high inflation rate (61.98% y/y in November 2023),<sup>15</sup> while the pace of increase in salaries and social welfare benefits is much slower. The rising cost of renting a flat (up 133% y/y in Q1 2023)<sup>16</sup> is another problem faced by Turkish society. The minimum wage, which in June 2023 was increased to more than 13,000 liras gross, accounts for less than a third of the sum which is viewed as the poverty line for a four-person household—45,700 liras.<sup>17</sup> 40% of the Turkish workforce earn this minimum wage.<sup>18</sup> However, it is unclear to what degree the household budgets are offset by income earned in the grey economy.

Due to the lack of prospects for their future, increasing numbers of Turks are deciding to emigrate to study or work. Migration from Turkey began to increase post-2020. In 2022, around 139,000 citizens left the country, which is 26% more than in 2021. Young people account for most of the emigrants.<sup>19</sup> Increased interest in emigration is also evident in the exponential rise in Schengen visa applications, from 272,000 in 2021 to 778,000 in 2022.<sup>20</sup> The number of asylum applications submitted by Turkish citizens in the European Union has also been rising. In 2022, more than 49,000 of these were recorded, which ranked Turkey fourth in terms of the number of these applications. This number was almost 30,000 more than in 2021.<sup>21</sup>

The country’s poor financial situation has contributed to the population becoming increasingly impoverished and unable to fulfil their aspirations, and is negatively affecting public sentiment. This results, among other things, in an increase in hostile behaviour towards Syrian refugees. Moreover, the government has failed to devise an effective integration strategy targeted at them. Syrian refugees are socially excluded and frequently fall victim to attacks. They are often accused of taking jobs which otherwise would be taken by Turkish nationals, of exploiting the financial support provided by the state and of engaging in criminal behaviour.

<sup>14</sup> See the official website of the centenary of the founding of the republic: ‘Yüzyılın İşini 20 Yıla Sığdırdık’, T.C. İletişim Başkanlığı, yuzuncuyil.gov.tr.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Consumer Price Index, November 2023’, Turkstat, 4 December 2023, data.tuik.gov.tr.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Dünyada konut fiyatlarının en çok arttığı üç şehir: Ankara, İzmir ve İstanbul’, Euronews, 26 August 2023, tr.euronews.com.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Türk-İş Kasım 2023 Açlık ve Yoksulluk Sınırı’, Türk-İş, 29 November 2023, turkis.org.tr.

<sup>18</sup> Ö. Yıldırım, O.O. Gemici, ‘Bakan Işıkhan: Asgari ücrette herkesin mutabık kaldığı bir tutarda uzlaşılaacağını ümit ediyorum’, Anadolu Ajansı, 2 November 2023, aa.com.tr.

<sup>19</sup> ‘International Migration Statistics, 2022’, Turkstat, 24 July 2023, data.tuik.gov.tr.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Migration and Home Affairs’, European Commission, home-affairs.ec.europa.eu.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Annual asylum statistics’, Eurostat, ec.europa.eu/eurostat.

The economic and social crisis also has a political aspect. The initial period of Erdoğan's party rule saw the state's gradual liberalisation and democratisation. In the political aspect, Turkey sought to meet EU requirements, which resulted in the opening of its EU accession negotiations in 2005. This period ended definitively in 2013 with the Turkish leadership's crackdown on anti-government protests held in Istanbul's Gezi Park and with its conflict with the Gülen Movement which had previously supported the government. The widespread feeling of insecurity triggered by these events served as a pretext for the consolidation of authoritarian rule. This process clearly intensified following the 2016 failed coup and the subsequent wave of repression.

Contemporary Turkey has failed to observe democratic standards. Freedom House considers it as a 'non-free' state. Turkey's politicised judiciary has come under particular criticism because the government has used it as a tool to repress opposition groups, independent organisations and journalists.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, the Kurdish problem is also important. The AKP has joined the list of previous governments which failed to resolve this issue. During the AKP's first term, the state's approach to this

minority group improved compared with the previous Kemalist rule during which the mere fact that a Kurdish minority existed had sometimes been challenged. As part of the liberalisation strategy, Kurdish became the optional language of instruction in schools and a Kurdish-language state TV channel was launched. However, the government's attempts to reach an agreement with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) failed, which resulted in a military escalation between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces. Since 2015, Turkey has regularly carried out counter-terrorism operations nationwide and launched attacks against the PKK-linked organisations operating in Syria and Iraq. The government has used the threat of terrorism as a tool to both step up control of the state apparatus and to boost social mobilisation.

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## Identity shifts

Alongside the social transition of the past two decades, an identity shift has also been underway. The AKP came to power as an anti-establishment and reformist party, and its electoral successes resulted from its skilful management of the public's expectations in these spheres. One of its main goals was to put an end to the former dominance of the nationalist and secularist elite which enjoyed the support of a military which was willing to intervene in the political system.

A unique 'cult of the state' has served as the bonding element between a major portion of Turkish society (excluding the Kurds) and the Turkish political scene.<sup>23</sup> This emerged in the early years of the Turkish republic and emphasises the state's paramount importance and historical success. Not only did Erdoğan's rule fail to weaken the 'cult of the state' but it has even consolidated it. The consecutive governments sought to neutralise the secular nationalism which had formed the basis for Kemalism. In the initial period of its rule, the AKP attempted to replace it with a selective adaptation of liberal slogans and a new civic ideology which recognised the multi-ethnic nature of the state and explicitly cited the legacy of the Ottoman Empire; this is sometimes referred to as neo-Ottomanism. At the same time, the government used pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic themes which stem from nationalist traditions. However, ultimately a unique combination of all these ideas emerged in Turkey, in which

<sup>22</sup> 'Freedom in the World 2023: Turkey', Freedom House, [freedomhouse.org](https://freedomhouse.org).

<sup>23</sup> This issue was discussed for example by Mateusz Chudziak, see 'Kult państwa w „Nowej Turcji”', *Sensus Historiae*, Vol. XLVIII (2022/3), pp. 35–60, [sensushistoriae.epigram.eu](https://sensushistoriae.epigram.eu).

the Ottoman heritage was highly appreciated and key elements of republican nationalism were retained. This happened because the AKP was able to maintain a flexible platform which suited the current social and political situation. Nationalist parties have been a permanent element of Turkish political life. The parties represented in the Meclis include two extreme nationalist parties: the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has been the AKP's minority coalition partner since 2018, and the opposition Good Party (İYİ). Nationalist views are also prominent in both the AKP and the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP).

However, recent years have seen an emergence of Turkish xenophobic and anti-system ultra-nationalism which took advantage of the growing dislike of refugees and migrants. This was reflected in the

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results of the 2023 elections. Anti-system nationalist Sinan Oğan came third in the first round of the presidential election (he won 5.2% of the vote) and it is likely that the votes cast by his electorate determined the outcome of the runoff. Although Turkey's anti-immigrant alternative right parties are not represented in parliament, their representatives are skilful users of social media and have repeatedly contributed to the spread of disinformation.<sup>24</sup> Other politicians cannot afford to ignore them.

Another challenge faced by those involved in the Turkish social and political life involves the strong polarisation concerning not only political views and attitudes, but also fears, lifestyle choices and the media.<sup>25</sup> Cultural and moral issues are at the centre of public debate. The present ruling elite has skilfully taken advantage of the rift between the conservative and religious part of society, which supports the government, and the secular one, which supports the opposition.

The role played by religion is one of the contentious issues which divide Turkish society. When the AKP came to power, it resulted in a strong appreciation of conservative and religious attitudes among the public. Under Erdoğan, Islam, which for years had been ruthlessly eliminated from public space, was gradually restored. Practical manifestations of this process included the decisions to lift the ban on wearing headscarves at universities and, as regards national symbols, to restore the religious function of the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque which had been functioning as a museum. In his speeches, President Erdoğan repeatedly announced that under his rule Turkey would raise a 'pious generation', for example by prioritising religious schools such as the imam-hatip type schools and by providing financial and institutional support to the Diyanet, the state Directorate of Religious Affairs. Despite these measures, secularisation trends have been gaining ground in Turkish society. Although individuals who identify themselves as Muslims still make up an overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens (92.3%), followed by deists (3.2%) and atheists (2.7%), this does not translate into participation in basic religious practices. 39.7% of Turkish Muslims pray five times a day, 48.8% attend Friday prayers and 66.5% fast during Ramadan. It is worth noting that 73% of Turks are convinced that their society's religiousness has been declining.<sup>26</sup> This fall in religious practices will not undermine the political role of Islam in the future because religious rhetoric is firmly rooted in Turkey's political culture and Islam is an important element of Turkish national identity. Turkey's broad support for the Palestinians<sup>27</sup> results from several factors including the feeling of religious unity.

<sup>24</sup> For example, they exaggerate the number of Syrians residing in Turkey and argue that this number stands at almost 10 mn or even as many as 13 mn.

<sup>25</sup> KONDA Barötesi: Türkiye'de Kutuplaşma, Ocak 2019, konda.com.tr.

<sup>26</sup> H. Efe, A. Yargı, Türkiye'de Dindarlık Algısı, *Toplumsal Eğilimler*, no. 3, 2023, ipc.sabanciuniv.edu.

<sup>27</sup> K. Strachota, 'Turkey's harsh response to the conflict in Gaza', OSW, 23 October 2023, osw.waw.pl.

Turkey's ambivalent attitude towards the West is a permanent and important element of the Turkish political identity. Despite consecutive spells of warming and cooling of its relations with its Western partners, Turkey continues to be institutionally linked with the West, as it is a NATO member and has declared its intention to join the EU. The West is a point of reference and a target of aspirations in terms of quality of life and lifestyle choices. Moreover, Turks are influenced by the globalised Western culture and are active social media users. Nevertheless, anti-Western slogans are highly popular and firmly rooted in how Turkey sees the world. They

stem from certain historical factors such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Triple Entente's attempts to partition the country in the wake of the First World War. Resentment towards

the West is accompanied by the sense of threat posed by unspecified 'external forces' which allegedly intend to strip Turkey of its agency and to impose foreign cultural patterns on it. This narrative also affects Turkey's views on foreign policy. As many as 51% of Turks have a negative opinion regarding the US's role in international politics, 40% think the same about the EU.<sup>28</sup> These sentiments are skilfully fuelled by Erdoğan, who presents himself as the only guarantor of the country's independence and as a strong leader who will ensure Turkey the global recognition which it deserves. Other factors which significantly contribute to Turkey's ambiguous attitude towards the West include unfulfilled EU membership ambitions and the conviction that Ankara is misunderstood by its most important partners.

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## The outlook for Turkish politics

Turkey is undergoing a major transition regarding its modernisation and identity shifts. However, despite its young population, due to the economic crisis and the signs of exhaustion of the previous development model it has failed to produce a sufficient amount of civic energy capable of challenging the status quo and remodelling the political scene. The ruling camp won a landslide victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections held in May 2023,<sup>29</sup> which showed that there was no genuine alternative to Erdoğan and his party even in a situation of ongoing social transition and economic crisis. To some degree, the president owes his triumph to his strong systemic advantage, the politicisation of the state apparatus and media dominance. However, his success was also due to the mistakes made by the opposition which, despite unprecedented mobilisation, was unable to present an attractive and coherent platform and to win over a majority of the electorate. The opposition's main political force, a coalition made up of six parties, was unable to present voters with prospects of security and stability. The proactive ruling camp, which skilfully took advantage of the divisions within the opposition, stood out against this backdrop. Another important factor involved the AKP's achievements linked with the country's modernisation and the improvement of the situation of the formerly marginalised groups. The ruling camp managed to present itself as the only guarantor of the country's security and stability. In this context, it is worth noting that the AKP also came first in the elections in most of the areas affected by the catastrophic earthquake of February 2023, where it successfully presented itself as a force capable of containing the situation rather than the party responsible for the neglect.

<sup>28</sup> *Transatlantic Trends 2023: Public Opinion in a Shifting Global Order*, pp. 13–16, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, [gmfus.org](https://www.gmfus.org).

<sup>29</sup> The result of the presidential runoff was as follows: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won 52.18%, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu 47.82%. The elections to the Meclis, Turkey's parliament: 323 out of 600 seats went to the People's Alliance (the AKP, MHP and YRP), 212 to the Nation Alliance (CHP and İYİ) and 65 to the Labour and Freedom Alliance (YSP and TIP).

It should not be expected in the near future that Turkey will see spectacular political changes triggered by social issues. The system seems to be stable and President Erdoğan's power is consolidated. The economic crisis and the decline in the quality of life did trigger isolated protests over specific issues<sup>30</sup> and negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees are displayed during occasional street protests.<sup>31</sup> However, these have no potential to transform into a large scale protest movement; none have occurred in Turkey since the Gezi Park demonstrations. This does not mean that Turks are becoming politically passive, as demonstrated by the recent voter turnout, which was the highest in over 20 years (87.04%). However, there is no doubt that the AKP has so far been successful in channelling political sentiment.

Representatives of the opposition parties which ran in the most recent elections, that is the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) alongside its five smaller coalition partners, found

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themselves trapped as a result of their defeat. Conflicts both between the specific parties and within them became apparent, and resulted, among other things, in a reshuffle in the position of the CHP chairman. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the recent presidential candidate, had to step down as head of the CHP and was succeeded by Özgül Özelem, who is a proponent of reforms within the party. The post-election ideological and identity crisis was evident not only in the opposition groups, but also in their electorate as well as among those intellectuals and media organisations which supported them.

The local elections planned for spring 2024 will be a test for the Turkish political scene, as they will decide the fate of the mayors of the major metropolitan areas of Istanbul and Ankara. These cities have been ruled by CHP politicians since 2019. For the CHP, losing control of these prestigious cities could result in the opposition becoming even more marginalised. Due to the fragmentation of the former opposition bloc and to the trial launched against Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, the CHP candidates have limited chances of re-election. However, it seems that the most important issue involves the ability of the party's new leadership to re-organise the party structures and re-mobilise its disappointed voters. In Istanbul, the outcome of the vote may be determined by the attitude of the Kurds who became disillusioned with the CHP's nationalist turn which occurred at the end of the presidential campaign. This may result in the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (HEDEP) abandoning its tacit support for İmamoğlu and appointing its own candidate. This, in turn, could result in the fragmentation of the votes cast for the opposition.

A draft of the new constitution, which Erdoğan has repeatedly announced in his speeches, could create an opportunity to engage the public in the political debate, to revive this debate and to end the stagnation. The currently valid constitution has a profound historical context, as it was adopted in 1982 following a military coup and has been amended several times since then. The adoption of a new one would require a qualified majority vote in the Meclis (400 out of the 600 MPs) or a referendum called by the president over a proposed law to amend the constitution (which, in turn, would require previous approval by a minimum of 360 MPs). Either way, the AKP does not hold the required majority, even with its coalition partners, so it would need to cooperate with the opposition. This, however, would require Erdoğan to make concessions and for the time being he does not seem ready for this. Moreover, the government will use the constitutional debate as another tool to manage

<sup>30</sup> For example the recent student protests held following the tragic death of a female student living in a state-run student dormitory due to an elevator failure. 'Students across Turkey protest negligence of state-run dorms after death in elevator', Duvar English, 27 October 2023, [duvarenglish.com](https://www.duvarenglish.com).

<sup>31</sup> T. Yılmaz, 'They fear to go to work': Demonstration against Syrian refugees in Turkey's industrial hotbed', Bianet English, 3 July 2023, [bianet.org](https://bianet.org).

public sentiment by fuelling identity disputes and deepening polarisation. Ultimately, should a new constitution be enacted, this could prompt the Turkish government to further consolidate power around the president.

Sooner or later, a certain adjustment or even liberalisation of the system will naturally occur due to the generational change which the Turkish political scene is facing. Erdoğan himself has publicly declared that the present term is his last. Moreover, he seems to be aware of the challenge posed by the inevitable transfer of power. His most likely 'successors' include Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Selçuk Bayraktar, CEO of Baykar, a company manufacturing military drones and other equipment, who, incidentally, is the president's son-in-law. Fidan, the long-term head of the National Intelligence Organisation (MİT), enjoys the highest popular support. Turkish citizens appreciate the firmness and competence with which he represents the country internationally. Bayraktar, for his part, has gained recognition for his successful business undertakings and the Teknofest festival which showcases the greatest achievements of Turkish and foreign technology, mainly in the military sphere. The event is very popular – according to the organisers it is attended by up to 2.5 mn participants.

It should be noted that both potential presidential contenders have achieved certain successes in those areas which are most relevant to the electorate of the present ruling camp. These include security and an active foreign policy, as well as modernisation and economic development. It is an open question whether either of them will be able to fill the gap left by Erdoğan and respond to the public's demand for a strong leader. It is also unclear whether a controlled transfer of power will be possible and whether the system's stability could be maintained without the central figure of a charismatic leader such as Erdoğan. In any variant of the political system's transition, the role of the social factor will increase.