



Election campaign over toughest migration policy

*An analysis of the migration policy plans
in the context of the Turkish parliamentary and
presidential elections 2023*

A report by Paula Edling & Anna Schenkenberger

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IBAN : DE11 4306 0967 4005 7941 00
BIC: GENODEM1GLS (Bochum)

Upcoming elections

On 14th May, Turkey is due to hold a parliamentary and presidential election that is attracting a lot of international attention as a “fateful election” because of its potential impact on domestic and foreign policy. [1] After more than 20 years of governance by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party, the AKP, a secular opposition consisting of six parties has rallied behind the social democrat Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (CHP) for the first time. 2 According to current polls, it is a neck-and-neck race between the two presidential candidates, meaning a change of government – and with it an associated political turnaround – in Turkey seems at least possible for the first time in decades [3/4] In essence, the election campaign is about replacing or continuing Erdoğan’s authoritarian and Islamic-conservative government.

An election victory for the opposition would – according to the campaign pledges – be associated with a reinstatement of the rule of law and parliamentary democracy, which is why it should in principle be seen as positive in view of the severe restrictions on fundamental rights in Turkey. This article, however, focuses on the orientation of Turkish asylum and migration policy negotiated in the election programmes, which is particularly complex due to Turkey’s geopolitical situation and its instrumentalisation as an EU buffer zone for refugee movements. We show that a victory of the government as well as of the opposition is linked to acute plans of isolation and that refugees and migrants are instrumentalized as political pawns in this election campaign.

The treatment of the 4.5 million refugees from Syria is an especially charged issue in the Turkish election campaign. This is because – partly due to years of instrumentalisation by the current government – refugees are blamed for the precarious economic situation in Turkey, with continuous inflation and high unemployment rates, which have only been exacerbated by the severe earthquake in early 2023.

[1] Gottschlich, Jürgen (04.05.2023). Elections in Turkey: Unity against Erdoğan. Taz. <https://taz.de/Wahlen-in-der-Tuerkei/15928729/>. (accessed 06.05.23).

[2] In addition to the CHP, the alliance also includes the nationalist İYİ - Party, the Islamist-conservative Bliss Party (Saadet Partisi), the centre-right oriented 'Demokrat Parti', the DEVA (Democracy and Progress Party) and the Gelecek Partisi (Future Party). The opposition continues to be supported by the left-wing pro-Kurdish HDP party, which has decided not to run for president.

[3] Altunkaya, Tuba (19.04.2023). Turkey opinion poll tracker: Erdoğan vs Kılıçdaroğlu. Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/14/turkey-opinion-poll-tracker-erdogan-vs-kilicdaroglu> (accessed 06.05.23).

[4] A Given the decades of entrenched corruption structures in the country, accurate forecasts are difficult to make, as it cannot be safely assumed that the election will be conducted according to the rule of law.

The pro-migrant policy and mood of society as a whole, in which Syrian refugees in Turkey were referred to as “guests” [5] and welcomed in 2011, has shifted step by step over time, as with numerous other immigration contexts, towards rejection and agitation. [6] Against this background, the AKP government has already adopted a much more conservative asylum and migration policy in recent years. Among other measures, so-called “voluntary return” mechanisms [7] were implemented, which are in effect systematic deportation plans largely financed by the EU. In addition, the policy shift changed the mood among the population, as an opinion poll from 2021 shows: 70% of respondents said they would vote for the party that would be toughest on refugees in this year’s election. [8] This attitude is reflected in the election programmes of both opponents, namely in sharpened plans of isolation, criminalisation and deportation. One basic idea for the future seems to unite the politically divided country: “Turkiye first”... and refugees out.

In this overview article on the upcoming elections, we first take a look back to 2011 and trace the development of migration policy in Turkey until today. Then we look at the political orientation of the two opposing presidential candidates and their election programs. Finally, we take into consideration what that means for the future of Turkish asylum and migration policy.

[5] Presidency of the Republic of Turkiye (04.10.2015). “We will maintain our open door policy, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/35538/we-will-maintain-our-open-door-policy> (accessed 06.05.23).

[6] Tahiroğlu, Merve (17.08.2022). Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#2B> (accessed 06.05.23).

[7] In 2019–2022, a programme called ‘Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants in Türkiye’ (AVRR) was introduced, which was co-financed by the EU for the first time with €5.5 million. A current renegotiation provides for EU funding of over 8 million euros.

[8] Sazak, Selim (08.08.2021). Turkey’s Refugee Problem Is Reaching a Breaking Point. Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/turkey-refugee-erdogan-akp-crisis-chp-syria-afghanistan/> (accessed 06.05.23).



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Review: 2011- today

Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, several million people have fled from the neighbouring country to Turkey. This and further refugee movements from other neighbouring countries (such as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq) to Turkey led to a state “migration management” that did not exist in this form until 2011.

Since the development of these migration policy instruments and laws was at all times strongly linked to political interests that are still relevant today in the context of the upcoming election, we want to roughly trace their gradual development as a relevant starting point for the current situation.

In the first years after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Syrian refugees were initially settled in camps in the south-eastern border region with Syria. At that time, the AKP government legitimised the admission of Syrians by naming them “Muslim brothers and sisters” to whom the gates should not be closed in times of need. The Syrians were nevertheless both referred to and treated as “guests” all along, underlining the Turkish authorities’ expectation that the conflict in Syria would end in the near future and that Syrian refugees would return to their home country. [9] As Lamis Abdelaaty writes, from the outset this guest role had the problematic implication that “one is dependent on the goodwill of the host and cannot invoke international law and rights.” [10]

[9] Ataç, İlker; Heck, Gerda; Hess, Sabine; Kaşlı, Zeynep; Ratfisch, Philipp; Soykan, Cavidan; Yılmaz, Bediz (2017). Contested B/Orders. Turkey’s Changing Migration Regime. An Introduction, in: movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies 3 (2), p. 43.

[10] Abdelaaty, Lamis (2019): Refugees and Guesthood in Turkey, in: Journal of Refugee Studies, 0 (0), s. 5.

Barely two years after the outbreak of war in Syria, on 11 April 2013, the landmark Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) [11] came into force in Turkey. The LFIP distinguishes between three types of international protection status that can be granted to asylum seekers in Turkey (cf. Art. 61–63 LFIP). According to this, only persons who fall under the definition of refugee according to the 1951 Refugee Convention and come from a European country of origin are entitled to refugee status. Meanwhile, persons who fall under the definition of refugee according to the 1951 Refugee Convention but come from a so-called non-European country of origin are only granted conditional refugee status – i.e. not linked to legal claims.

Finally, those persons who do not fall under the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but who would face death penalty or torture if returned to their country of origin, or who would be exposed to an individual risk of indiscriminate violence due to war situations or armed conflicts, are granted subsidiary protection status. In addition to the LFIP, an additional set of rules for the so-called temporary protection status was created on 13th October 2014 with the enactment of Directive No. 2014/6883 [12], which has since been granted predominantly to Syrian nationals. [13] Although the directive sets out the conditions for registration and residence in Turkey, the duration of protection is not specified and is thus not linked to legal entitlements. This means nothing other than that temporary protection status can be withdrawn at any time by a decision of the Council of Ministers. [14]

As a further relevant migration policy regulation, the EU–Turkey Declaration [15] was concluded between representatives of the EU and Turkey on 18 March 2016 in response to the increasing number of people seeking protection on European territory. In principle, this declaration provided for the repatriation of all “irregular” migrants arriving on the Greek islands back to Turkey. In return, Turkey was promised six billion euros of financial aid for their care. Furthermore, in a 1:1 mechanism, for every person deported to Turkey, a Syrian with the prospect of staying would be allowed to travel to the EU. Officially, the EU–Turkey declaration was supposed to reduce the number of “unauthorised border crossings” into the EU as well as the death toll in the Aegean Sea, which has skyrocketed since 2015. In reality, however, the declaration has turned Turkey into an EU buffer zone for undesirable migration. The declaration has rightly been criticised for years due to its political consequences, including the disastrous hotspot camp policy in Greece.

[11] Law on Foreigners and International Protection of 04 April 2013, No. 6458, Document ID: 1023732.

[12] Directive No. 2014/6883 of 13.10.2014 on temporary protection in Turkey.

[13] Refugee Rights Turkey (31.12.2020). “Country Report: Turkey”, Country Report - Update 2020 (The Asylum Information Database (AIDA)), 19, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AIDA-TR_2020update.pdf.

[14] Dicle, Ayşe Ergin (30.09.2020). “What Happened at the Greece–Turkey Border in early 2020?”. Constitutional Blog on Matters Constitutional, <https://verfassungsblog.de/what-happened-at-the-greece-turkey-border-in-early-2020/>.

[15] European Council (18.03.2016). Press release: EU–Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

As a result of the coup attempt in July 2016, the domestic political situation in Turkey changed drastically: in order to secure its grip on power, the government under President Erdoğan relied even more on a conservative-Islamic and authoritarian line than in the past. The split between conservative and secular forces increased and religious minorities in Turkey were essentially threatened and their rights restricted. [16] One of the consequences of this was that, from 2018 onwards, support offered by pro-government organisations was mainly directed at religious refugees from Syria, while international organisations were gradually banned and all non-religious aid disappeared. As a result, a large gap in support structures for refugees emerged. In addition, the structural discrimination against non-religious refugees also led to more and more Syrians and non-Syrians living in Turkey without legal status and access to public services and healthcare. [17].

The fundamental trend in the deterioration of the situation of refugees and migrants in Turkey can be exemplified by further key points: On 22 July 2019, as part of an amendment to the LFIP, time limits for appealing against deportation decisions were reduced from fifteen to ten days; the UNHCR withdrew completely from asylum procedures in Turkey; and the major cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir were effectively closed for the registration of Syrians and other migrants. From then on, newly arriving refugees were relegated to so-called satellite cities. [18] The institutional conditions there led – among many other inadequacies – to extremely lengthy and uncertain processes in the registration of asylum procedures. [19] In this way, life for refugees in Turkey has gradually become more and more characterised by insecurity and arbitrariness.

By 2020, the political rhetoric of the AKP government has definitely turned away from the once propagated hospitality. While Syrians were welcomed in the first years mainly because of their function as cheap labour and were held up as essential for the economy, the focus was now on Turkey's economic burden due to the reception of refugees. As a result, the general right of Syrian refugees to stay in Turkey was increasingly questioned in public. Among other things, Erdoğan justified this change by stating that Turkey could not be the world's "refugee warehouse". [20] His argumentation, which appeals to the nationalistic pride of a society that has always been strongly patriotic, was increasingly met with approval.

[16] Sido, Kamal (16.02.2022). "Islamisation of Turkey: Division for the Preservation of Power", Press Portal. Society for Threatened Peoples, <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/29402/5147672> (accessed 06.05.23).

[17] Karadağ, Sibel; Bahar, Ilker (2022). "Ending up in a Cul-De-Sag? Critical Junctures In The EU-Turkey 'Deaf' On Its Sixth Anniversary", IPC Mercator Analysis, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20220319-12032748.pdf>, p. 6.

[18] Refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey are mainly accommodated in so-called satellite towns and wait there for their resettlement. In the rarest of cases, those housed there are allowed to leave the cities. In 2018, the list of official satellite cities for international protection seekers included 62 provinces across Turkey (see ECRE / AIDA Country Report Turkey 2019, p. 138).

[19] Karadağ, Sibel; Bahar, Ilker (2022). "Ending up in a Cul-De-Sag? Critical Junctures In The EU-Turkey 'Deaf' On Its Sixth Anniversary", IPC Mercator Analysis, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20220319-12032748.pdf>, p. 5.

[20] Szak, Selim (08.08.2021). Turkey's Refugee Problem Is Reaching a Breaking Point. Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/turkey-refugee-erdogan-akp-crisis-chp-syria-afghanistan/> (accessed 06.05.23).

As a result, refugees in Turkey became the subject of initially isolated attacks, such as the demolition of Syrian shops and homes, and an increase in verbal and physical attacks on Syrian refugees. [21]

Moreover, the relationship with Greece increasingly deteriorated, fuelled by the ongoing Cyprus conflict and the practical implementation of the EU-Turkey deal. Both countries accuse each other of false statements and propaganda, including on pushbacks practised by the Greek coast guard in the Aegean Sea. [22]

The same applies to relations with the EU; Turkey increasingly accused the EU of not paying the promised money under the declaration and leaving it alone to deal with the responsibility. The situation escalated when Erdoğan carried out his threat to stop holding back refugees on their way to the EU and opened the border to the EU. As a result, thousands of refugees made their way directly from Turkey to Europe, many of which were violently repelled at the Turkish-Bulgarian border and forced back into Turkey only a few days later. All these conflicts eventually led to a total suspension of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2020. [23]

In summer 2020, the first plans of the Turkish government for a systematic deportation of "irregular" migrants (i.e. refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Iraq) and in the course of the so-called "voluntary return" (mainly for Syrians) became known. "Instead of changing the open-door policy or the regulations on accepting refugees, [the Turkish government] wants to encourage refugees to go back to Syria by repairing houses there to encourage them to return voluntarily." [24]

Given the ongoing situation in Syria, it can be assumed that behind this euphemistic wording lies a repressive deportation policy – the actual implementation of which is reflected in the arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation of Syrians to Northern Syria.

[21] Tokyay, Menekse (05.09.2022). Hate crimes against Syrian refugees in Turkey on rise: Experts, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2156836/middle-east> (accessed 06.05.2023).

[22] ANSA (08.03.2021). "Migrants: Greece Accuses Turkey of Violating Obligations", InfoMigrants, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/34056/migrants-greece-accuses-turkey-of-violating-obligations> (accessed 06.05.2023). <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/eu-tuerkei-fluechtlingsabkommen-109.html> (Zugriff 06.05.2023).

[23] Engel, Gudrun (05.03.2020). EU-Turkey Agreement: Who broke the refugee deal?, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/eu-tuerkei-fluechtlingsabkommen-109.html> (accessed 06.05.2023).

[24] Interview with a professor from the Department of English Language and Literature at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi, Turkey (Original from English: "And probably a million Syrian refugees will be sent back to the northern part of Syria controlled by Turkey and the ruling party will be just propagating that a lot more...")

In particular, the police violence used to certify their “voluntary return” in documents is unquestionably a disregard for international law. [25] The already precarious situation for refugees in Turkey worsened even further with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: as Turkey’s “migration management” was inadequately prepared for such a crisis, refugees no longer had any access to health care, drop-in centres to provide food had to close suddenly due to precautions containing the pandemic, and continuous schooling could no longer be guaranteed. [26]

Today, there is a general rejection of refugees and migrants in general. Particularly present in this context are (cross-party) nationalist arguments of alienation, shown by the following example: in 2022, the narrative of a banner with the inscription “The border is our honour” by nationalist activists, who were initially arrested on terrorism charges, was later taken up in a similar way by the two opposition parties CHP and İyi Party. The parties responded to the arrests of activists’ by hanging similar banners on buildings across the country. [28] The Turkish society that once enthusiastically showed solidarity with the people rejects permanent coexistence with Syrians and other immigrants in 2023. [29]

[25] Sou-Jie van Brunnersum (24.10.2022). Turkey accused of deporting hundreds of refugees to Syria. Infomigrants, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/44223/turkey-accused-of-deporting-hundreds-of-refugees-to-syria> (accessed 06.05.2023).

[26] UNHCR (10.10.2021): COVID-19 in Türkiye and livelihoods of vulnerable people and refugees: a synthesis report, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/covid-19-turkiye-and-livelihoods-vulnerable-people-and-refugees-synthesis-report-10-october-2022>.

[27] Sazak, Selim (08.08.2021). Turkey’s Refugee Problem Is Reaching a Breaking Point. Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/turkey-refugee-erdogan-akp-crisis-chp-syria-afghanistan/> (accessed 06.05.23).

[28] *ibid.*

[29] Erdoğan, M. Murat (2019). “Syrians Barometer 2019; A Framework for achieving social cohesion with Syrians in Turkey”. UNCHR, p. 13.



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Current situation as a starting point for the election campaign

Turkey, currently the largest country of immigration in the world, is home to over six million refugees and so-called irregular migrants. This subdivision and designation is based on the categorisation in Turkey outlined above: officially, the approximately four million people from the neighbouring country Syria are counted as “persons with temporary protection status,” while the other two million people who entered primarily from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan are considered irregular migrants, irrespective of the reasons for fleeing, from which no comparable protection status is derived. [30] Especially in the east of the country, in cities like Hatay or Gaziantep, Syrian refugees make up more than 25% of the population.

Undoubtedly, caring for the six million refugees and irregular migrants in Turkey is a major cost for Turkey: according to estimates, the government has invested the equivalent of 100 billion US dollars in recent years for the accommodation, medical care and education of Syrian refugees. [31] Nevertheless, this is not nearly enough to cover the need for care. [32] In view of the high supply needs in the increasingly ailing economic state, the 6 billion euros promised as part of the EU-Turkey deal (as well as the further 3 billion euros currently promised) are not nearly sufficient. At this point, therefore, the rhetorical question must be raised as to the extent to which the EU is pursuing the alleged interest of providing adequate care for those seeking protection with its subsidies, or rather exploiting Turkey's economic dependence for its interests in the isolationist policy. [33]

[30] Tahiroğlu, Merve (17.08.2022). Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#2B> (accessed 06.05.23).

[31] Karabat, Ayşe (10.06.2022). Turkey and the Syrian Refugees. How Syrians are being scapegoated, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-und-die-syrischen-fluechtlinge-wie-die-syrer-zum-suendenbock-werden> (accessed 06.05.23).

[32] Tahiroğlu, Merve (17.08.2022). Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#2B> (accessed 06.05.23).

[33] *ibid.*

Overall, the increasing inflation in Turkey has had a strong impact on the lives of refugees and their prospects in Turkey. Since 2020, the economic burden of refugees has been manifested in the idea of a common scapegoat and is currently being further instrumentalized in the ongoing election campaigns. Syrians are held responsible for the precarious economic situation (with inflation of over 50%) and rising unemployment (according to current figures, the unemployment rate is around 10%, and youth unemployment is significantly higher at around 19% [34]). A large part of the population also has the impression that refugees receive preferential treatment through state programmes. [35] This understanding is made clear, for example, by headlines such as “Every Ten Syrians Have Put Six Turks Out of a Job” in the popular newspaper *Sözcü*, in whose article data from the International Centre for Migration Policy Development is incorrectly summarised and presented. [36] As a result of such campaigns – as well as high levels of state repression – there is currently no longer a political party or major civil society group in Turkey that advocates for refugee rights. [37]

The worsening anti-migrant sentiment has been reflected in recent years in the nationwide spread of racist incitement and various attacks against Syrians, not only verbal but increasingly physical, which are only increasing in 2023. *Al-Monitor* quotes Syrian student Mulham Obeid as follows:

“I face almost daily racism by Turkish youth, not to mention that the employer pays me a wage according to his liking and refused to obtain a work permit for me. If the authorities know about that, I will be the culprit. But I did not find any other job.” [38]

He goes on to tell how he was threatened with a knife in an everyday situation because of his origin. All in all, there have already been several politically motivated murders in recent years from knife and gun attacks. [39] Currently, the unemployment rate, especially among Syrian refugees, is higher than ever. [40] Moreover, Syrian children are affected by the harsh policies: according to current surveys, only about one third of all children of school age were attending school in 2022. [41] Consequently, a real prospect to remain is to be denied in Turkey.

[34] Yasar, Aydin (05.05.2023). End of the Erdogan Era? A Directional Election for Turkey, *Quantara*, <https://de.quantara.de/inhalt/ende-der-aera-erdogan-eine-richtungswahl-fuer-die-tuerkei> (accessed 06.05.23).

[35] Sazak, Selim (08.08.2021). Turkey's Refugee Problem Is Reaching a Breaking Point. *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/turkey-refugee-erdogan-akp-crisis-chp-syria-afghanistan/> (accessed 06.05.23).

[36] Kaya, Ahmet (05.08.2021). Her 10 Suriyeli mülteci 6 Türk'ü işsiz bıraktı, *Sozcu*, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/ekonomi/her-10-suriyeli-multeci-6-turku-issiz-birakti-6575518/> (accessed 06.05.2023).

[37] Pawson, Melissa (06.12.2022). Migrant rights advocates fear for safety ahead of Turkish elections, *Open Democracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/migrant-rights-advocates-fear-for-safety-ahead-of-turkish-elections/> (accessed 06.05.23).

<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/ekonomi/her-10-suriyeli-multeci-6-turku-issiz-birakti-6575518/> (Zugriff 06.05.2023).

[38] *Al-Monitor* (25.06.2022). Syrian refugees recount harassment, abuse in Turkey, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-refugees-recount-harassment-abuse-turkey#ixzz80OENvdb0> (accessed 06.05.23).

[39] Sazak, Selim (08.08.2021). Turkey's Refugee Problem Is Reaching a Breaking Point. *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/turkey-refugee-erdogan-akp-crisis-chp-syria-afghanistan/> (accessed 06.05.23).

[40] Kaya, Ahmet (05.08.2021). Her 10 Suriyeli mülteci 6 Türk'ü işsiz bıraktı, *Sozcu*, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/ekonomi/her-10-suriyeli-multeci-6-turku-issiz-birakti-6575518/> (accessed 06.05.2023).

[41] Uludağ, Alican (30.03.2022). MEB raporu: Suriyeli çocukların yüzde 35'i okula gidemiyor, <https://www.dw.com/tr/meb-raporu-suriyeli-cocukların-yüzde-35-i-okula-gidemiyor/a-61307411> (accessed 06.05.2023).



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The election and its possible consequences

It became clear that since its policy shift the current government has instrumentalized the issue of migration over the last few years to stir up fears, polarise and stigmatise Syrian refugees in particular. [42] The fear of a supposed foreignisation of Turkey is growing, building on the Kemalist tradition of patriotic and nationalist thought structures. This tendency is reflected across Turkey's political landscape: according to a recent poll by the Metropol Institute, 81.7% of the Turkish population want Syrians to return to their home country. 84% of AKP voters are in favour of this. Among opposition supporters, the percentage is even higher: 89% of CHP voters and 97% of voters of the nationalist opposition party İyi (Good Party) no longer want the refugees in the country. [43]

This clear sentiment across the political spectrum is also noticeably reflected in the election programmes of both the government and the opposition: Syrians are clearly at the forefront of the anti-migrant sentiment and the focus of political campaigns. In principle, however, all irregular migrants are being advocated to leave the country over the long term.

In the following paragraphs, we present an overview of these election programmes and promises. First, we will take a look at the different presidential candidates and their political orientation in order to be able to better classify the different election promises. Secondly, building on this presentation and analysis, we outline possible consequences of the election programmes for the future.

[42] Yasar, Aydin (05.05.2023). End of the Erdogan Era? A Directional Election for Turkey, Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/ende-der-aera-erdogan-eine-richtungswahl-fuer-die-tuerkei> (accessed 06.05.23).

[43] Karabat, Ayşe (10.06.2022). Turkey and the Syrian Refugees. How Syrians are being scapegoated, Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-und-die-syrischen-fluechtlinge-wie-die-syrer-zum-suendenbock-werden> (accessed 06.05.23).



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The candidates and their political orientation

Fundamentally, Turkish society is strongly polarised politically. Differences in the fundamental values, identities and realities of the citizens are also reflected in their voting behaviour. In view of the upcoming election, society can be roughly divided into two camps: despite different income levels, most conservative and religious citizens, as well as some nationalists, traditionally vote for the AKP and its allied ultra-right MHP. More secular citizens with more modern lifestyles and a Western orientation, on the other hand, support the opposition led by the CHP. [44]

The Erdoğan government

For twenty years, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party, the Islamic-conservative AKP, have headed the Turkish government. His foreign policy is less pro-European than that of his predecessor government and is now oriented more toward Arab-influenced states (Syria and Saudi Arabia) than traditionally Kemalist toward the West.

After the AKP government initially brought about an economic upswing at the beginning of the millennium and thus united a great deal of support behind it, an inflation and debt crisis has prevailed in Turkey for several years, which also caused confidence in Erdoğan to waver. Broadly summarised, Erdoğan and the AKP created a presidential system in 2017 with a constitutional referendum as a reaction to this – which is also understood primarily as a consequence of the coup attempt in 2016 – in which he now enjoys an unprecedented monopoly of power as president and can effectively “govern” beyond parliament. [45]

[44] Karabat, Ayşe (04.05.2022). Turkish opposition. Wooing the electorate, Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/tuerkische-opposition-werben-um-die-waehlerschaft> (accessed 06.05.23).

[45] tagesschau (10.02.2017). Draft constitutional reform. Erdogan approves referendum, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/erdogan-verfassungsreform-101.html> (accessed 07.05.2023).

How authoritarian the regime has become since then can be seen, among other aspects, in the severe restrictions on freedom of press and expression, the numerous arbitrary arrests, state control of the internet (as most recently in the context of the earthquake, when, for example, Twitter was blocked after criticism of the government's crisis management was voiced) and various restrictions on liberal legislation, such as the ban on abortions.

The Kılıçdaroğlu opposition

The opposing presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is part of a politically relatively broad-based pro-European alliance of six parties, which is trying to replace the current government under President Erdoğan. The presidential candidate promises voters above all the reinstallation of the parliamentary system and thus the limitation of presidential power and a revival of Turkish democracy. If one takes a closer look at the six-party alliance, the diversity of the various parties becomes abundantly clear: the approach of the Kemalist-social democratic CHP, which was originally founded by Kemal Atatürk, is strongly influenced by the Western orientation of the founding figures of the republic. The İyi - Party (Good Party), a splinter from the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), has a national-economic, liberal orientation. The DP (Democratic Party) is predominantly liberal-conservative as are the DEVA (Democracy and Progress Party) and the GP (Future Party). The SP (Bliss Party), on the other hand, is more Islamist-oriented. [46]

[46] Yasar, Aydin (05.05.2023): End of the Erdogan Era? A Directional Election for Turkey, Quantara, <https://de.quantara.de/inhalt/ende-der-aera-erdogan-eine-richtungswahl-fuer-die-tuerkei> (accessed 06.05.23).



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Migration policy plans in the election programmes

In 2023, the basic living conditions for the people of Turkey are exceedingly difficult due to rampant inflation, high unemployment, earthquakes and the resulting poverty. As already described, right-wing populist and nationalist parties in particular have seized the opportunity to exploit this seemingly hopeless situation for their own purposes. [47] The (political) vision of “Turkiye First”, which is deeply rooted in tradition in Turkey, is reflected in the election programmes of both the ruling party and the opposition.

Government election campaign on migration policy

At this point in the article, it has already become clear that the government is using populist arguments such as “the Turkish people have a lot to fight for” in an attempt to absorb the socially widespread frustration and concern by cracking down on refugees. [48] Since 2018, the government has therefore already been planning a concrete resettlement project, which we have already referred to above: the AVRR programme has been in existence since 2019, in which initially 3,500 “irregular migrants” should be “voluntarily” deported, financed by the EU. [49] Another draft provides for the long-term “voluntary” return of one million Syrians to an expanded “safe zone” in Northern Syria. A smaller version of such a zone already exists. It was established in 2019 – just a few months before Turkey launched a military offensive against Kurdish-led forces in Northern Syria. [50]

[47] Topcu, Elmas (25.04.2023). Turkey before the elections. “We will send the Syrians back”, Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-vor-den-wahlen-wir-werden-die-syrer-zurueckschicken> (accessed 06.05.23).

[48] Pawson, Melissa (06.12.2022). Migrant rights advocates fear for safety ahead of Turkish elections, Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/migrant-rights-advocates-fear-for-safety-ahead-of-turkish-elections/> (accessed 06.05.23).

[49] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye (2019): Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants in Türkiye (AVRR).

https://ab.gov.tr/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-of-irregular-migrants-in-turkey-avrr-_52216_en.html

[50] Pawson, Melissa (06.12.2022). Migrant rights advocates fear for safety ahead of Turkish elections, Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/migrant-rights-advocates-fear-for-safety-ahead-of-turkish-elections/> (accessed 06.05.23).

Thus, according to election promises, the government wants to facilitate the return of Syrians living in Turkey through Russian-brokered talks between Ankara and Damascus after more than a decade of political hostilities. [51] Damascus is pushing for a concrete commitment from Ankara to withdraw the Turkish military presence in Northern Syria. [52] Although exact figures have not yet been established, it is estimated that the Turkish authorities have already deported 155,000 Syrian refugees between 2019 and 2021 – de facto not “voluntary”, but forced returns. [53] These “safe zones” fulfil two of the most important goals of Turkey’s Syria policy: the creation of a buffer to the Syrian Kurds and the repatriation of Syrian refugees.

This policy of establishing “safe zones” within Syria is promoted by the government in the election campaign as an all-round solution for dealing with migration in Turkey. [54] Compared to the opposition, however, the government is holding back on concrete promises regarding a future repatriation policy in its election campaign. The migration management plans – as well as the general policy of the AKP – seem to be deliberately characterised by intransparency and arbitrariness. In this way, grievances are hidden in their governance, which is characterised more than ever by corruption, nepotism and mismanagement, such as recently exemplified in the interest rate policy, which ultimately contributed to Turkey’s current economic situation.

With regard to an envisaged future relationship with the EU, and especially with Greece, the AKP hardly shows any clear course in the election campaign – as in some other areas. The relationship with Greece remains extremely tense due to the situation in Cyprus as well as migration movements from Turkey to Greece and unresolved responsibilities. A resolution of this conflict does not seem to be in sight under Erdoğan, as long as the EU continues to refuse to take responsibility (financially or logistically) for people fleeing. In view of the last few years, however, it can be assumed that a renegotiation of the EU-Turkey declaration is at least not completely out of the question for Erdoğan. This, with its ultimate implications for those fleeing, can be associated primarily with continued encirclement in Turkey rather than an installation of more rights and care.

[51] Al-Monitor (27.03.2023): 60,000 Syrians have left Turkey, Turkish defence chief says, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/60000-syrians-have-left-turkey-turkish-defense-chief-says>

[52] *ibid.*

[53] *ibid.*

[54] 4 Petillo, Kelly (09.05.2022). Turkey’s open door closes: How Europe can better support Syrian refugees, ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-open-door-closes-how-europe-can-better-support-syrian-refugees/>

Opposition

The Turkish government's haphazard and often non-transparent migration policy of recent years, combined with the economic crisis, has also made Syrian refugees a target for the opposition in the fight for votes. [55] The resulting rhetoric of the Kemalist-social democratic CHP in the election campaign can be classified as "anti-Arab" and anti-migrant. Most recently, Kılıçdaroğlu, as an Alevi, spoke out in favour of the recognition and rights of minorities in Turkey – but these should apparently not apply to everyone. [56] Nationalist and patriotic tendencies have always been visible in the CHP and its electorate in the tradition of Atatürk, but in the alliance with the parties of the six-party alliance, especially the national-conservative İyî party, it clearly intensified its nationalist stance in the election campaign. [57] Kılıçdaroğlu constantly criticised the current government's open-door policy for Syrians and spoke out against Turkey's military intervention in the Syrian civil war. [58] His criticism went so far that he explicitly called on the Turkish military to protect Turkey from incoming refugees. [59]

Similar to the government, Tanju Özcan of the CHP argues with regard to the closure policy, namely that there is a connection between Syrian refugees and the economic crisis. Özcan addressed migrants from Syria on posters in Arabic and Turkish:

"You see the economic crisis in our country. Our own youth is unemployed, families live below the poverty line. We cannot continue to share bread and water with you." [60]

The İyî party advocates a similar agenda, which includes the expulsion of illegalised immigrants and a quota system for the settlement of Syrians in urban neighbourhoods. [61]

[55] Karabat, Ayşe (10.06.2022). Turkey and the Syrian Refugees. How Syrians are being scapegoated, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-und-die-syrischen-fluechtlinge-wie-die-syrer-zum-suendenbock-werden> (accessed 06.05.23).

[56] Hamza, Assiya (07.05.2023). 'All we're asking is to be recognised': the Alevis of Turkey struggle for equality, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230507-all-that-we-re-asking-for-is-to-be-recognised-turkish-alevis-struggle-for-equality> (accessed: 08.05.2023).

[57] Pawson, Melissa (06.12.2022). Migrant rights advocates fear for safety ahead of Turkish elections, Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/migrant-rights-advocates-fear-for-safety-ahead-of-turkish-elections/> (accessed 06.05.23).

[58] Esen, Berk (2022). Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey, SWP comment, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C55_Turkey_Post-2023.pdf, P.6.

[59] Sanderson, Sertan (03.04.2023). Turkey cracks down on migrants in major operation as pre-election rhetoric heats up, Infomigrants, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/47945/turkey-cracks-down-on-migrants-in-major-operation-as-pre-election-rhetoric-heats-up> (accessed 06.05.23); O.V. (03.05.2022). Erdoğan, 1 milyon Suriyelinin gönüllü geri dönüşü için hazırlık yaptıklarını söyledi, BBC News Türkiye, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-61307585> (accessed 06.05.23).

[60] Karabat, Ayşe (10.06.2022). Turkey and the Syrian Refugees. How Syrians are being scapegoated, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-und-die-syrischen-fluechtlinge-wie-die-syrer-zum-suendenbock-werden> (accessed 06.05.23).

[61] Esen, Berk (2022). Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey, SWP comment, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C55_Turkey_Post-2023.pdf, P.6

The election promises of the Victory Party (Zafer) led by Umit Ozdag head in the same direction. Ozdag went, however, a step further by posting a ten-minute short film called "The Silent Occupation" on YouTube. It depicts a dystopian future in which Turks are driven out of their neighbourhoods by Arab real estate agents and the Turkish language is banned. [62] Such populist means are used to fuel the stigmatisation of refugees and to play on fears of an alleged threat of foreign infiltration. The chairperson of the IP, Meral Akşener, agreed with this depiction. She also called on Erdoğan to appoint her as special envoy for refugees in May 2022. To this demand, she added that she would like to travel to Syria at any time to shake hands with Assad and send Syrian refugees back there. [63]

Overall, Kılıçdaroğlu, as the opposition's presidential candidate, is now promising voters that if he wins the election, he will set the conditions for a "voluntary" return of refugees to Syria within two years. This is to be done, among other ways, through dialogue with the Assad regime, increased cooperation and coordination with the international community (the strongest financial support here would be from the EU), and infrastructure investments in Syria. [64] At the same time, "intensive contacts and dialogues" with Damascus and opposition representatives, with the exception of militant groups, are promised to support peace efforts in Syria. [65] The AKP government has provided military support to groups fighting against the Assad regime for years and has conducted military operations in Syria since 2016. Due to the high financial expenditures in the context of these military operations, the new government would certainly have an incentive to negotiate a military withdrawal in return for the return of hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Whether it would receive concrete concessions from the Syrian government, however, remains questionable. [66]

With regard to further foreign policy plans of the opposition, a joint strategy paper of the six-party alliance states that Turkey's future foreign policy will be based on Atatürk's slogan "peace at home, peace in the world" and will adhere to universal values and international law, free of ideological considerations. [67] A tough stance is envisaged with regard to border security: new technologies and drones are to be used to prevent uncontrolled migration in the future. In addition, visa liberalisation remains on the agenda as one of the most important negotiating points in asylum and migration policy. Another focus will be on repatriation agreements with third countries (such as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan). [68]

[62] Petillo, Kelly (09.05.2022). Turkey's open door closes: How Europe can better support Syrian refugees, ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-open-door-closes-how-europe-can-better-support-syrian-refugees/>

[63] Tahiroğlu, Merve (17.08.2022). Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#2B> (accessed 06.05.23).

[64] *ibid.*

[65] Tastekin, Fehim (15.04.2023). Turkey's opposition foreign policy promises gradual departure from Erdogan's, Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/turkeys-opposition-foreign-policy-promises-gradual-departure-erdogans> (accessed 06.05.23).

[66] Esen, Berk (2022). Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey, SWP comment, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C55_Turkey_Post-2023.pdf, P.5.

[67] Tastekin, Fehim (15.04.2023). Turkey's opposition foreign policy promises gradual departure from Erdogan's, Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/turkeys-opposition-foreign-policy-promises-gradual-departure-erdogans> (accessed 06.05.23).

[68] Topcu, Elmas (25.04.2023). Turkey before the elections. "We will send the Syrians back", Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-vor-den-wahlen-wir-werden-die-syrer-zurueckschicken> (accessed 06.05).

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In terms of cooperation with the EU, the opposition would want to reshape EU-Turkey relations in case of an electoral victory. In addition, Turkey's relations with its Western allies should be improved again. [69] Furthermore, the opposition supports Turkey's application for full membership in the European Union and pledges to respect all rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. [70] In addition, the EU-Turkey Deal is to be reviewed; a renegotiation is rejected. [71]

In the rivalry in the eastern Mediterranean over energy resources and in Turkey's territorial disputes with Greece, a continuity of previous policy is to be expected, even if the six-party alliance announces that it will give priority to diplomacy and abandon the confrontational style that has characterised Turkish foreign policy under the AKP over the past decade. [72]

[68] Topcu, Elmas (25.04.2023). Turkey before the elections. "We will send the Syrians back", Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-vor-den-wahlen-wir-werden-die-syrer-zurueckschicken> (accessed 06.05.23).

[69] 9 Esen, Berk (2022). Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey, SWP comment, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C55_Turkey_Post-2023.pdf, p.7.

[70] Tastekin, Fehim (15.04.2023). Turkey's opposition foreign policy promises gradual departure from Erdogan's, Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/turkeys-opposition-foreign-policy-promises-gradual-departure-erdogans> (accessed 06.05.23).

[71] Topcu, Elmas (25.04.2023). Turkey before the elections. "We will send the Syrians back", Qantara, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/die-tuerkei-vor-den-wahlen-wir-werden-die-syrer-zurueckschicken> (accessed 06.05.23).

[72] Tastekin, Fehim (15.04.2023). Turkey's opposition foreign policy promises gradual departure from Erdogan's, Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/turkeys-opposition-foreign-policy-promises-gradual-departure-erdogans> (accessed 06.05.23).



Conclusion and outlook

As this article has made clear, after twenty years of AKP government under Erdoğan, the political situation in Turkey is characterised by arbitrariness, repression and lack of transparency. The hopes of many people for a political upheaval are therefore high: if the opposition should indeed win the presidential election on 14 th May, the new government wants to take on the task of building a democratic bureaucracy, restructuring Turkey's diplomatic course and economic policy, and returning to a parliamentary system. [73]

As described in this article, the democratic reorientation of the new government would not be connected with an improvement of the situation for refugees and migrants in Turkey, but rather with even harsher repression and deportation plans, plans which envision people on the run being treated not as individuals with rights and livelihoods, but rather as pawns capable of being abused for political goals in the same vein as the policies of the AKP.

At the same time, it must be clearly emphasised that the EU's outsourcing policy in recent years is in no way inferior to this instrumentalisation and plays an important role in the repressive development of Turkish migration policy. The increasingly anti-migrant mood in Turkish society and politics is, in addition to the already nationalistic and patriotic culture, ultimately related to the fact that the reception of so many fleeing people (who actually want to continue their journey) was forced upon them because they were simply not wanted in the EU and Turkey could be blackmailed, due to its economic situation and geopolitical position. In addition, Turkey has hoped for decades to join the EU, but has been repeatedly denied. The opposition's envisaged foreign policy realignment towards the West would therefore still face several more hurdles: in particular, the status of Cyprus, the maritime borders with Greece and the EU-Turkey Deal will continue to strain bilateral relations with the EU.

[73] Esen, Berk (2022). Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey, SWP comment, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C55_Turkey_Post-2023.pdf, P.1.

As far as Turkey is concerned, we can only hope that after the election, the political narrative that has been fuelled by the AKP government in recent years will change, the “scapegoating” of refugees will come to an end and political responsibility will be taken. Attacks and incitement against refugees in society must be clearly condemned instead of politically fuelled, and civil society spaces for solidarity with refugees must be able to take place again. Access to the rights of all must be guaranteed. People must not be deported involuntarily and, above all, they must not be misused for foreign and domestic policy inadequacies and mismanagement!

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