



ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΑΡΙΣΤΕΙΑΣ JEAN MONNET  
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΠΟΔΙΣΤΡΙΑΚΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ

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# ELECTIONS IN TURKIYE AND THEIR IMPACT ON GREECE: Erdogan, Kilicdaroglu or Unrest?

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As we are getting closer to the Turkish elections of 14 May, we cannot help wondering about the winner and the policy he will implement vis-à-vis Greece and the Republic of Cyprus (ROC). The official Greek stance of a strictly observed neutrality is reasonable and the appropriate one. However, several media and analysts have expressed their preference for “the devil we know”, in contrast to most of their European and US counterparts. Moreover, the silence of Greece’s political parties on their post-election policies regarding a -potential- internationally-mediated dialogue with Turkey, is striking. In what follows, we will try to analyze in brief the predominant scenarios and their possible impact on Greece.

1. It goes without saying that it is not the Greeks that will decide on the new Turkish leader. The same applies to the decision of the Turkish constituency that will determine -among others- the dynamics of ultra-nationalistic tendencies in Turkey, and, more particularly, their dynamics among youth who have been in recent years systematically indoctrinated with toxic rhetoric against Greece and Cyprus. Almost half of the voters were born after 1981 and both EU countries should take heed of these young voters in designing their own strategy. In general, the race between a primarily pro-European orientation and anti-westernism (Islamism, Eurasianism, Global South) will significantly impact the whole East Mediterranean area. It is therefore of utmost importance to detect and chart these opposite tendencies.

2. There is one thing one can be sure about: that Turkey’s long-standing foreign policy and general strategy vis-à-vis its two EU neighbours is not going to drastically change with a new President. Regardless of who the next Head of State will be, Ankara’s aggressive assertiveness towards Greece and ROC will more or less continue, coupled with aspirations to play the role of an emerging Great Power. However, Kilicdaroglu’s need to focus on the economic and rule-of-law

agenda as a priority should be taken in consideration. As a result, one should not expect a radical change in Turkish standpoints and claims, regardless of the outcome of the poll.

3. However, and despite the unchanging Turkish positions vis-à-vis Greece and ROC, these positions will continue evolving, with possible shifts in priorities, tone, perseverance and tenor. Even slight shifts in Turkey's attitude can lead to differentiated results, hence the need for these potential outcomes to be studied and addressed as per different scenarios. Consequently, as will be hereafter analyzed, apart from the core of Turkish policy at present, and depending on who the winner will be, differentiations and opportunities for Athens and Nicosia cannot be excluded, provided the relevant administrations make the most of the -shorter or longer- period of introversion created by the February 2023 earthquake, by means of adequate planning and 'smart' initiatives.

4. Furthermore, special mention should be made of the fact that, for the rest of the Western world as well as for many third countries, the question of who of the two Presidential candidates will prevail is vital, being viewed as an event that will take a great impact even on global correlations: it is estimated that the winner will lead Turkey either again towards the West and a more democratic way of life (in case the opposition wins), or towards even more aggressiveness and multidimensional autonomy coupled with a more openly Islamo-centric society (compared to the current one, shaped by 20 years of Erdogan governance).

5. The omnipresent inequality of arms at the disposal of the opposing parties' candidates and campaigns is conspicuous and self-evident. Come to democratic freedoms, Erdogan's Turkey has been downgraded to the bottom places in world rankings. As a result, opinion polls (some of them western-type reliable ones, some of them staged) are insufficient tools for predicting results in the way they are used to predict them in democratic western states. The number of unfair interventions by the authoritarian Erdogan system is expected to rise (many have already taken place), such as extensive rigging, denouncing political opponents as treasonists preparing to back up a US coup to topple him, staged terrorist attacks, threats, imprisonments, persecutions, prohibitions etc. Therefore, obtaining accurate information on the exact scale of the presumed electoral fraud and, subsequently, on the actual difference between the expressed people's will and the officially announced results, is a very difficult task.

6. Notwithstanding the above, sooner or later, a new government will come to power. As far as Greece is concerned, the reasonable question is whose victory -Erdogan's or Kilicdaroglu's- would run less counter to the country's national interests. According to the most frequently

expressed, but oversimplified point of view, both are equally aggressive and are posing an equal threat for Greece (premised on certain Kilicdaroglu's threatening statements about Greek islands, outdoing Erdogan's similar ones). The traditional Kemalist aggression in Cyprus in 1974 and at the Imia islets in 1996 are brought in as eloquent historic reminders, in justification of the above view.

7. Before examining the two main scenarios about the result of the ballot, a third one should also be considered: the forced cohabitation of two different political forces in the Presidency and the National Assembly. In such case, one should expect a seriously strained governance, with the opposition alliance of Six more likely to additionally suffer from internal division.

8. Another scenario, that of a tight and in any case contested (by either side) result, should be added to the above 'clear-cut' scenarios. Except for an incontestably obvious election, tension will spike after the official announcement of the results with both sides standing ready to question the outcome, but with distinct differences in the way they will do it: while the opposition will most probably demonstrate its anger over its 'stolen victory' in a more or less peaceful manner, the Erdogan system is expected to even attempt a coup, with furious supporters taking to the streets, and with interventions by paramilitary and deep state groups - and even the police and armed forces. The narrative propagated by the Erdogan system before the election, makes references to alleged plans for a coup d' état by the US and other dark powers in order to overthrow the 'historic' leader of the Turkish nation. The period of introverted instability (especially if either side asks for a runoff or a recount) may last several months.

9. The 'perfect storm' scenario. Before the earthquake and amidst uncontained Turkish aggressiveness, I had pointed out this scenario as a possible desperate move that Erdogan would make if he was found with his back against the wall. By orchestrating a contrived military 'incident' with Greece, his goal would be either to win the election by mobilizing the Turkish nationalistic basis and bringing it together in support of his leadership, or to postpone them (if he thought he may lose them), by invoking the relevant provision of the Turkish Constitution. With the new 'post-earthquake' Greek-Turkish *détente*, the risk is significantly reduced. Depending on the result in the first round of the Turkish election, Athens should be on its guard from 22 until 28 of May. During this period, there might be a political decision-making vacuum in Greece when the successive exploratory mandates to form a government will be given by the President of the Republic. Turkey, on its part, will be heading to the second, and most

critical, round of the Presidential race. Erdogan, determined to win at all costs, could try to take advantage of any short-lived 'political vacuum' in Athens because of the exploratory mandates. Another version could involve the interim period until a new Greek government is formed after the second round (eventually July 2) if meanwhile, Turkey goes through a period of contestation over the results and of internal turmoil -a likelihood that cannot be excluded.

10. An eventual long period of internal instability and crisis will protract the 'calm seas' atmosphere and the resulting 'window of opportunity' created for Greece by the earthquake. However, this "window of opportunity" should not be translated in Athens into romantic hugs, an impulse to engage in dialogue no matter on what basis, and, most importantly, into naïve hopes that Turkey has "come to its senses" and has abandoned its claims. Greece needs to make the best out of this window of opportunity by preparing itself, and by enhancing and enriching - and even revising- its national strategy. This is because, despite the efforts taken in recent years, the strategy has not proved sufficiently solid and effective so as to contain or annul Turkey's revisionist agenda that, on the contrary, grows in number of topics. In this sense, the calmer post-earthquake and election period presents Greece with an opportunity for national contemplation, rectifying mistakes and eliminating deficiencies, coolheaded assessment of partners and allies, assuming sensible initiatives and for cross-party preparedness for the challenges to come. But the mutism of the Greek parties' election programmes in parallel with other indicators, attest to an overall reluctance to plan and undertake action towards capitalizing on the newly-shaped situation...

11. As we approach May 14, the well-known Turkish deficiencies in terms of democracy and rule of law are becoming increasingly evident. Moreover, Erdogan has shifted to a more aggressive misinformation campaign and an inflammatory rhetoric with threats that "Turkiye will be destroyed if we leave". Given these realities, Erdogan's by-all-possible-means 'victory' in the double election appears to be the more plausible scenario. An eventual double triumph will literally make him the uncontrollable dominant player, in terms of both domestic and foreign policy. It will practically result in an accelerated further debilitation or a de facto abolition of pluralist democracy and rule of law in the country. As to his external strategy, we will most probably bear witness to an increasingly pro-Global South, Eurasian, Islamo-centric and to a decreasingly westward course. Despite out-of-control Erdogan's occasional mutations and extortionate obstructionism, he will in all likelihood continue his 'visionary' course with a more anti-US and anti-western strategy, a more arrogant and transactional one (when, of course, he

thinks he has a margin for maneuver), more flexible in case of deadlock, especially right after winning the election, with a view to accommodate the country's very pressing fiscal and post-earthquake reconstruction needs. He will be using leverage towards all directions by means of a belligerent anti-western activism, envisaging support by the most influential players (the West, Russia, China, the Gulf states), an interventionist export of influence, power and weapon systems (to the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, Eurasia), a step-by-step propelling of Muslim communities to the ranks of regulators within an increasingly vulnerable Old Continent, an under his leadership political coordination of -at least part of- the Muslim world, etc. He will constantly be 'inventing' new "issues" (simultaneously and on all fronts) in order to collect benefits in exchange, quasi ransom for his extortion of -primarily, but not exclusively- the West.

12. For Greece, in particular, a new term of Erdogan in office does not seem likely to be a linear continuation of his -already highly aggressive- old one, or simply 'the devil we know'. Absolute authoritarian power in the hands of a reinvigorated and henceforth totally uncontrollable leader predicts (with the exception of short-lived sudden U-turn coaxing) nothing good for 'the other side of the sea'. A renewed mandate will strengthen considerably his self-complacency as a historic leader, successor of Mehmed II the Conqueror, and will skyrocket his belief in his vision of a 'Turkish century'; worse, it will also further encourage his revisionist aspirations regarding the Peace Treaties of Lausanne (1923) and Paris (1947). In defiance of the expected and rather lukewarm admonishments (and more rarely pressures) from the EU and the US, he will in all likelihood continue to obsessively pound Greece with threats, demanding that it chooses either 1) direct military confrontation (resembling a 'special military operation' in Putin's terminology), or 2) simply accede to Turkish positions across the board ( such as on the issues of Greece's territorial waters of 12 nm and East Mediterranean EEZ etc.) or even more than that ( such as the "disarmament" of the Greek islands etc.). Against such prospective threats, some analysts in Athens seem to draw hope from Greece's upgraded role as a 'reliable western stronghold' -a gain to be made for Athens as a result of Erdogan's cross-eyed but visibly anti-western policy. However, at present, it has not been ensured (in a more or less favorable situation) that the West will take decisive action *ceteris paribus* against Erdogan as it did against Putin. Besides, in the event of Erdogan's triumph (when the possibility of bellicose behaviour is significantly increased) the "stronghold strategy" would make sense only if Athens had ensured - not based on wishful thinking but beforehand- tangible support from the US. This West's "military outpost" scenario vis-à-vis further erdoganian anti-US actions could materialize only on

the (improbable) assumption of explicit American and EU guarantees that would act as a catalyst for deterring Turkey's revisionist schemes by taking decisive action, if Turkey's threat is realized.

13. If the opposition wins the election, the consequences will be more complex. The much-feared high level of uncertainty has primarily to do with its quasi paralyzing character of a highly heterogeneous coalition of six parties with the only unifying element among them being their opposition to Erdogan. The opposition's promise to prioritize the amelioration of citizens' living standards, as well as to address the stressed economy's problems and the rule-of-law backsliding, can be regarded as a positive development for both the West and Turkey's neighbours. The same would be true of a shift from Erdogan's military activism towards an introversion in the best interest of Turkish society - in theory this shift could go as far as the establishment of genuine (intra EU style) good neighbourly relations. At the international level, the carefully-planned westwards turn (lift of veto for Sweden to join NATO, freezing of the S-400 deal etc.) will be lucrative for Turkey in both political and financial terms. The 'return of the prodigal son' goes hand in hand with political gains and enticing promises for the 'second biggest army in NATO' (F-16 and possibly F-35 etc.). These developments would be anything but favourable for Greece and ROC, which will suddenly realize the lost opportunities of which they could have taken advantage at a propitious time in the recent years. The shift will probably prove to be inferior to western expectations, making Kilicdaroglu vulnerable to internal accusations of "servilely obeying" to Washington's orders, having abandoned his predecessor's 'globally recognized as multi-dimensional' policy.

14. The departure point of every Greek assessment of an eventual victory by Kilicdaroglu should be that Athens and Nicosia will not see any meaningful change in Turkish strategy. Whoever hopes that Turkish claims will be rationalized, will soon be disillusioned -although some shifting in style and essence cannot be excluded (e.g., regarding Greek sovereignty over the Aegean islands). If the Table of the Six comes to power, Greece's hopes to play the role of West's outpost with Washington as a strong deterrent force and guarantor of borders, will be probably reduced. Furthermore, although it cannot be completely ruled out, Kilicdaroglu is less likely to expand the already exorbitant Turkish claims. In the worst-case scenario of an 'incident' in the seas, the new Turkish President will -unlike Erdogan- at least answer the American President's call (asking him to exercise self-restraint and to consider a diplomatic outcome).

Regarding the EU, the National Alliance will reinstate the aim of full accession, which would cause divides within the EU, and by way of trade-offs pave the way for the ideal choice for



Ankara and Brussels (if Athens does not pay heed) and for Greece's worst nightmare: an 'à la carte special relationship' for Turkey. Such an alternative scheme would amount to no obligations, conditionality and sanctions, for Ankara, eventually full participation in European defence, foreign policy, technology and the immense benefits of an upgraded Customs Union, financial support, funding etc. Conversely, Greece and ROC would lift their objections to aggressive behaviour without gaining anything tangible in exchange.

15. In any case, no matter which side wins the Turkish election, international pressure towards the resolution of Greek-Turkish problems will most likely be immediate. The preferred approach will probably be mediation (a shadowy US- and Germany-led one is already underway) aiming at the substitution of the never-ending and ineffective procedure of "exploratory talks", but also of the apparently deadlocked recourse before the International Court of Justice. The West is in haste (especially if the Six win the elections) to wrap up, if possible, what they see as pending Greek-Turkish issues and the Cyprus Question. In this backdrop, the 'solutions' offered to Greece could go well beyond the one and only difference that Greece on its part considers that needs to be resolved (i.e., the delimitation of the continental shelf/EEZ). However, international mediators usually prefer a "package deal" approach. An unpleasant foretaste of the content of the latest Turkish claims (emanating from recent leaks) has given hint of six preconditions which are even more preposterous than all of the past ones. These preconditions were allegedly put on the table during the behind-the-scenes, currently in progress, procedure of contacts among advisors I.Kalin- A.M.Boura-G. Ploetner. Under normal circumstances, these stipulations would make the political alarm go off in Greece. The current pre-election mutism in Greece is all the more worrying given that western mediation will suddenly kick in after the elections are over in Greece and Turkey.

In sum, the differences between the policies to be followed by the eventual winners of the Turkish elections vis-à-vis Greece, will be rather small. However small, they are not marginal for Greece whose rational choice would not be the "devil we know", but the lesser of two evils. Instead of waters known to be full with sea mines, reefs and sharks, a wise captain would necessarily opt to navigate in uncharted waters that may prove to be less dangerous after all. In any circumstances, the safest route by far is early planning and multi-dimensional preparation to cover all possible scenarios, and, consequently, the effective exploitation by Greece of this interval in Turkish revisionist activism -odds are it shall be short.