

A good time for autocrats – a weekly news review

[2:00 pm 09/04/2022](#)



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Last Sunday, as progressives tried to come to terms with Viktor Orbán's decisive re-election as prime minister of Hungary, Turkey's President Erdoğan telephoned his congratulations and discussed hopes for further enhancing bilateral relations, including in the defence industries. Orbán and Erdoğan are members of a growing group of right-wing authoritarian populists, and both Erdoğan's supporters and those hoping to see him defeated have been examining the Hungarian example for clues about what could happen in Turkey's next election, which has to take place by June 2023. That the Hungarian opposition – like the main opposition in Turkey – consisted of an

alliance of six different parties has given Erdoğan's camp a revived confidence.

In a postmortem of the Hungarian election for Open Democracy, Adam Ramsay noted that the opposition even included the far-right Jobbik Party and had put forward a conservative candidate for prime minister. He commented, "Out of mutual desperation to rid the country of its increasingly autocratic ruler, they seemingly forgot to stand for anything." And that "If the only thing that unites you is hating Viktor Orbán, then you ensure the election is all about Orbán."

Such observations should certainly send alarm bells ringing for Turkey's People's Republican Party (CHP), whose opposition alliance ties them to the far-right Good Party (İYİ) and to giving a significant role to the İYİ leader, Meral Akşener. In fact, there are serious questions over how much change could be expected from the CHP itself, as we were again reminded last week when Ekrem İmamoğlu posted a tweet commemorating Alparslan Türkeş, founder of the far-right National Movement Party (MHP) and its fascist paramilitary Grey Wolves, on the anniversary of his death. İmamoğlu is the CHP mayor of Istanbul. He owes his position to tactical voting by Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) supporters who wanted to see him beat Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and he is touted as a possible presidential candidate to stand against Erdoğan.

Amberin Zaman, in Al Monitor, also draws attention to the lack of vision in the Turkish opposition's roadmap, which includes no reference to foreign policy, education, the Istanbul Convention, or the Kurdish Question. And she observes that the opposition in Hungary had seen electoral successes in the big cities in 2019, just like the Turkish opposition.

In both countries, state oppression and control of the media give the government a significant head start, and the government has also brought in changes to election rules calculated to work to their own advantage. Turkey's election law amendments came into effect on Wednesday.

But there are also important differences. In Turkey, the HDP offers a progressive alternative to the governing AKP/MHP alliance and the main opposition. If the HDP can survive, in some form, the attempts to close it down and restrict its key members, it has a potentially powerful king-maker role.

Further, while the Hungarian economy benefitted from EU membership, with the governing party reaping the reward, the Turkish economy is undergoing devastating inflation, with disastrous consequences for a large part of the population. An independent research group has calculated Turkey's inflation rate as over 140%, while even the official statistics admit to it being over 60%. A recent survey found that 59% of people claim that their income fails to cover their expenses, and a further 27% say that it hardly does so. is also up in Europe and America and is being further boosted by the war in Ukraine, but Turkey's economy, which is heavily dependent on imported oil and gas, is especially vulnerable. High fuel prices feed into other prices, including for food, and the Ukraine war is affecting the cost of other commodities, too, such as sunflower oil. Of course, the war also allows the government to deflect the blame for price rises.

A good war for Erdoğan

In fact, Ukraine has allowed Erdoğan and the AKP to regain some of their lost support. People see Turkey as playing a high profile role in international politics, which briefly distracts from the difficulties imposed by the economy. Even when the impacts of the rising cost of living are inescapable, the blame can be shifted to external forces. Meanwhile, the atmosphere of crisis favours authoritarian elements, as people look to the sense of security conveyed by a "strong leader". The crisis of war has come on top of the still-ongoing crisis of the pandemic.

So far, Erdoğan has been able to exploit the Ukraine war to his own advantage. His history of playing Russia and NATO off against each other has allowed him to transform Turkey into a negotiator between the two sides, and the rest of the world has overlooked Turkey's own violent aggression and contribution to world instability to confer on them the status of international statesman. In

fact, Turkey's own attacks have never been able to elicit much international outcry. For NATO countries, alienating Turkey is perceived as contrary to their own national interests. They do not want to discuss ethnic cleansing and gang rule in Turkish-occupied Syria or investigate allegations of Turkish use of chemical weapons in Iraq. When predominantly Kurdish cities within Turkey's own borders were destroyed by the Turkish military six years ago, few people saw the images of the rubble-strewn remains or talked about the 178 people burnt alive as they sheltered in Cizre's basements. Turkey received criticism from organisations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations, but governments did not want to do anything. A peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine is desperately needed, but this does not have to be at the expense of effectively encouraging brutal and destabilising aggression in another part of the world.

Writing for the European Council of Foreign Relations, Suat Kınıklioğlu, whose own political career has included active involvement with various Turkish political parties, observes that the war "has allowed Turkey to begin to rebuild its relationship with the West". He opines, "Putin's all-out invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated Turkey's strategic importance once again. Western capitals will need to work with Ankara on the conflict irrespective of their opinion of the Erdogan regime. Despite Erdogan's problematic relationship with many European countries, he has leveraged the war in Ukraine rather well. Just days after the invasion, Western leaders were willing to all but forget Turkey's democratic backsliding – and Erdogan became a leader with whom one could do business." Kınıklioğlu also points out that the Turkish opposition is weak on foreign policy issues; and he observes that by not applying sanctions – a position that can be justified by Turkey's role as mediator – the Turkish government both maintains good relations with Moscow and also protects the Turkish economy.

The politics of the Ukraine war have generated a terrifying renewed militarism and a strengthened focus on military alliances – especially NATO. In the looking-glass world of international politics, Turkey is building up its arms deals at the same time as garnering kudos for hosting peace talks.

Turkey's access to buying American weaponry has been blocked since December 2020 in response to their purchase of a missile defence system from Russia; but, last week, Reuters reported on a letter to Congress from the Biden administration, replying to a question about the potential sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. The letter, dated 17 March, while not explicitly supporting the sale – and noting that it would also have to be approved by Congress – stated that “The Administration believes that there are... compelling long-term NATO alliance unity and capability interests, as well as U.S. national security, economic and commercial interests that are supported by appropriate U.S. defense trade ties with Turkey”.

In addition, on Monday, Turkey and the United States announced the launch of a strategic mechanism to boost cooperation in areas such as the economy, defence, and “counterterrorism”. Although this was the culmination of months of diplomacy, Al-Monitor reports that the agreement “was accelerated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine”.

This Turkey/US announcement came just two days after the Kremlin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, had praised Erdoğan in an interview on Belarusian state television and described Turkey as “a very significant regional power and country” with which they had “excellent” relations. Peskov told viewers that, despite some differences, “the relationship based on mutual interests is dominant, so the two countries are developing big economic projects.”

Inside Turkey

None of this has prevented the Turkish Government from continuing their own aggression both within and outwith their borders.

In the Turkish province of Batman, villagers have described being tortured by military police. The hospital doctor was prevented from issuing a medical report, and a delegation from the HDP was prevented from entering the village to investigate. They were told that the village was shut off for a week due to ongoing military operations.

The fifth session of the eleventh hearing of the Kobanê trial took place on Monday. In this important case, which could see 108 people imprisoned for life, including leading members of the HDP, a prosecution witness statement was shown to be contrived and without substance. As summed up by the HDP's imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, speaking in his own defence, "The prosecutor conducting the investigation, with no evidence available, insistently sought after witnesses as he arrested me and Ms. Yüksekdağ [the other co-chair] without evidence and found witness Samir Baran. What did he say? 'They put the statement in front of me at the Security Directorate. I did not happen to read them, I did not have my lawyer. I told them to not put the things I did not say, but they did it'"

An indication of the extent to which critical thought has been eliminated from Turkish public space was provided by the programme for the Historical Materialism conference that will be held at Istanbul's Kadir Has University next weekend. This includes no mention of Kurds or the Kurdish question.

Syria

In Syria, Turkish attacks continue to defy ceasefire agreements. On Sunday, shells from the Turkish army and Turkish mercenary units targeted the area around Til Temir, injuring a villager and damaging the power station. When a member of the Syriac Military Council escorted Russian officials to inspect the damaged power station, a drone targeted the Military Council member's car, injuring both him and his translator. On Monday, Turkish drones hit a centre used by the internal security forces in Abu Ras, injuring three people; and on Wednesday, five members of the same family, including children, were injured by Turkish artillery shells. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) protest against Russia's silence. Russia is supposed to be a guarantor of the ceasefire, but they are content for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to come under pressure in the hope that this will force them to relinquish their autonomy and seek protection from Damascus.

The Damascus government also uses blockades to put direct pressure on the autonomous regions that are not geographically connected to the main

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Shahba Canton, which accommodates most of those displaced from Afrîn, is suffering from severe food shortages and inflated prices. The Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsoud and Al-Ashrafiyyah neighbourhoods of Aleppo have been under Syrian Government blockade since 13 March, and Rojava Information Centre reports that there is now no flour to make bread.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

Near the Iraq border, Turkey continues their military build-up in preparation for its next invasion into Iraq's northern mountains. Framed as "anti-terrorist actions" against the PKK, these attacks are consolidating Turkey's military presence in the region and driving local people from their villages and homesteads. On the Iraqi side of the border, Turkish soldiers have been reported trying – unsuccessfully – to persuade villagers to act as their agents, and monitor the movements of PKK guerillas.

The next Turkish attack is expected to be carried out in conjunction with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) peşmerga. Pursuit of their own self-interests has led the Barzani clan, which dominates the KDP and hence the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), to be totally dependent on Turkey's goodwill. It has also led them to clamp down hard on press freedom and employ some dubious practices to hide their ill-gotten wealth.

Writing in Columbia Journalism Review, Winthrop Rogers has described how a law brought in to stop sexist abuse online is being used to jail journalists and silence critics through self-censorship. He notes that "Individuals, lawmakers, party organs, the KRG prime minister's office, and government ministries and departments have all filed cases against journalists under Law 6."

Zack Kopplin, who earlier exposed the hidden property investments of the Prime Minister of the KRI, Masrour Barzani, has now turned his attention to Masrour's cousin. He found that KRI president Nechirvan Barzani has property assets "hidden behind complex systems of trusts and intermediaries,

including employees, friends, and family". He identified links to properties worth hundreds of thousands of pounds.

As Wikileaks demonstrated, the United States government has long been aware of the KRI's endemic corruption, and that hasn't stopped them and their European allies from working with and giving large amounts of military support to its business-friendly government.

Inspired by Öcalan

For Kurds everywhere, this week began with commemorations of Abdullah Öcalan's 73rd birthday and calls for his release from prison. It is now over a year since the Kurdish leader was allowed any contact with the outside world, and that was only a phone call to his brother that was cut off after less than five minutes. Among the many attestations to Öcalan's importance, I want to single out the testimony by Maryam Ibrahim, Coordinator of the Women's Office at the Zenobia Women's Gathering in Raqqa. She writes, "The fourth of April has become the day of the birth of the free woman. For us Arab women, it has become the start of gaining a new mentality". And she describes how Öcalan "established in our minds a new understanding of freedom and the meaning of humanity".

Öcalan's ideas have inspired people worldwide, even to the point of putting their own lives on the line. This week, Dirk Campbell, father of Anna Campbell, who was killed by a Turkish airstrike when defending Afrîn, has announced that he will be taking the case for the return of Anna's body to the European Court of Human Rights, where he hopes "to be given justice and to have international attention drawn to Turkey's widespread crimes against humanity".

Last week, I wrote about French anarchist Libre Flot, who fought alongside the YPG against ISIS in Raqqa, and who, apparently in response to this, was arrested by the French police under anti-terrorism legislation and held in isolation, awaiting trial for well over a year. On 27 February, he began a hunger strike to demand release, and last week, he was moved to a secure hospital.

On Monday, there were solidarity actions held by groups around the world, and on Tuesday, faced with his severe and rapidly deteriorating health, the authorities finally conceded to his demands and agreed that he could be freed pending his trial with an electronic bracelet and strict judicial control. First, though, he needs intensive medical care. The international comrades who demonstrated in support of Libre Flot on Monday included a group in Kyiv, who managed to make a banner at the same time as “provid[ing] military, medical and other supplies, particularly to anti-authoritarian units and individuals who are fighting in the resistance to the Russian invasion”. Solidarity!

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her website and follow her on Twitter