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Governance crises and resilience of authoritarian populism: 2023 Turkish elections from the perspective of Hirschman's 'exit, voice, and loyalty'

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ABSTRACT

The May 2023 elections in Turkey are puzzling because public support for President Erdoğan did not erode despite political-economic failures of considerable magnitude. The economy was ailing, the government's performance in containing natural disasters was dismal, and oscillations in foreign policy were perplexing. Yet, Erdoğan managed to win elections once again, giving him the mandate to continue ruling the country over the next five years. What explains this political outcome in the face of 'multiple governance crises'? We adopt Albert O. Hirschman's 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework to explain the multiple but interrelated sources of the resilience of authoritarian populism in Turkey. We suggest the 'exit, voice, and loyalty' equilibrium in the 2023 Turkish elections requires an integrated analysis along two dimensions, each interacting with and mutually reinforcing the other: the economy-identity nexus and the domestic-external nexus.

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Introduction

Turkish citizens went to the polls in consequential presidential and parliamentary elections on 14 May 2023 – the Republic's centennial year. The most important outcome was the reelection of President Erdoğan for another five-year term, dashing the hopes of many who had seen the elections as an opportunity for democratic renewal in the country. It was a success for Erdoğan, but not an unmitigated one. His party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), won 35% of the votes in the parliamentary election, but this was the second-lowest figure in over 20 years. In the presidential election, although Erdoğan emerged as the leading presidential candidate in the first round, he failed to pass the 50% threshold, so a second round took place on 28 May. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate of the opposition block (Nation Alliance), secured 47.82% of the votes in the second round. Nevertheless, what mattered in the end was that Erdoğan and his ruling coalition won the pivotal elections despite economic hardships, a devastating

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earthquake, and a series of governance failures in domestic and foreign policy realms. This outcome will have significant repercussions for Turkish politics and beyond.

The May 2023 elections are puzzling because public support for President Erdoğan did not erode despite political-economic failures of considerable magnitude. The economy was ailing, the government's performance in containing natural disasters was dismal, and oscillations in foreign policy were perplexing. Then, what explains the striking electoral resilience of the regime in the face of 'multiple governance crises?'[1]

Despite the significant democratic backsliding and a highly uneven playing field, elections matter in Turkey. The country does not have an established authoritarian system, nor was the regime formed through a 'violent liberation struggle' that is typically resilient to crises.[2] Instead, generating and sustaining patronage networks, mainly through the mobilization of state resources, constitute the foundations of the government's legitimacy. Furthermore, as previous empirical studies document in the Turkish context, governments were likely to lose elections when poor economic performance undermined the legitimacy of ruling parties, leading to their political demise (Akarca and Tansel 2006; Akarca 2019). This happened either through the process of electoral competition (e.g., the coalition government lost power in November 2002, paving the way for the rise of the AKP) or through military interventions (e.g., the end of the Democrat Party rule in 1960 and the fall of the coalition government led by the Justice Party in 1980). Hence, the governance failures were expected to upset the political equilibrium, and the opposition seemed to have a reasonable chance of winning. The resilience of the Erdoğan government under these circumstances makes the Turkish case puzzling and relevant to the broader literature.

In this article, to untangle the seemingly more enduring appeal of Erdoğan, we adopt Hirschman's 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework. Hirschman starts his insightful analysis with a straightforward question: how do individuals respond to the declining quality of products or services in their environment? There are, Hirschman suggests, two primary options. First, they might simply exit; they 'stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization' (Hirschman 1970, 4). Second, they might exercise the voice option; instead of silently exiting, they 'express their dissatisfaction directly,' hoping to improve the quality of products and services (Hirschman 1970, 4). A third option, loyalty, can be used as well; it either 'postpones exit' (Hirschman 1970, 82) or 'acts as a brake on the decision to exit' (Hirschman 1970, 88). The 'hallmark' of loyalty, as Hirschman (1970, 98) puts it, is 'the reluctance to exit in spite of disagreement with the organization.' At the same time, however, the loyalty option is almost always a function of the expectation 'that someone will act and something will happen to improve matters' (Hirschman 1970, 78).

Hirschman's framework is widely applied across the social sciences.[3] In politics, in the face of declining quality of governance, a critical question becomes, under what conditions do voters exercise the exit and voice options or remain loyal to the incumbent?[4] A citizen is likely to defect if 'her exit payoff is greater than her loyalty payoff' (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017, 724). In this context, the incumbent does two things: it increases the costs of exit (that is, voting for the opposition) and voice (that is, exercising freedom of expression to criticize the government) and increases the benefits of loyalty (that is, supporting the government). It is important to underline that voice – both on the government and opposition sides – is a hallmark of effective democratic governance and

critical to keeping political elites in check. However, 'voice is costly because activities like protesting, complaining and lobbying all require effort that could be put to an alternative use' (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017, 723). This is especially true in authoritarian regimes where governments frequently use the state's coercive capacity and mobilize public resources to punish dissenters arbitrarily, co-opt capital holders, and exercise political patronage to favor supporters.

Opposition parties can play a critical role in this context by reducing the risks and uncertainty associated with an effective counter-narrative and gaining the trust of the voters through credible leadership, political coordination, and alternative economic policies. The main goal for the opposition is to reduce the perceived cost of exit and voice and increase the expected benefits for voters to convince them to deny their loyalty to the incumbent. We should note at this point that exit can take different forms for those supporting opposition. As a last resort, for example, opposition voters may withdraw from politics altogether. Alternatively, especially well-educated citizens may decide to leave the country if they are repeatedly disappointed by political developments – what is called 'voting with one's feet' (Hirschman 1978, 95, 100, 103). The activation of this kind of 'seesaw or hydraulic exit-voice model,' as Hirschman (1993, 178, 186) highlights, would undermine voice. It is especially true in this circumstance that 'the presence of the exit alternative can (…) tend to atrophy the development of the art of voice' (Hirschman 1970, 43). This would inevitably lead to a decline in the quality and collective mobilization capacity of the opposition, which, in turn, would bolster the regime's stability and resilience as an unintended consequence.[5]

Then, in the Hirschmanian sense, we ask the following questions. Why did loyalty prevail over exit and voice for Turkish voters? How did Erdoğan tilt the balance in his favor, keeping his support base loyal despite considerable governance failures? Our main argument is that economic challenges per se were insufficient to break the resilience and electoral popularity of authoritarian populism. It is not because economic factors do not matter. In fact, the opposite is true – voters respond to deteriorations in the quality of governance. More important, however, is the overall balance for the voters between the benefits of remaining loyal to the regime and the costs of withdrawing their support and exiting. As we see it, in an institutional context where public space is compressed by the government and identity-related cleavages complement material incentive structures, several mechanisms dilute the relationship between economic performance and electoral success. Ultimately, in the Turkish case, President Erdoğan managed to create a political economy equilibrium by increasing the cost of exit and voice for citizens and devised policies to increase the benefits for those who remained loyal. The opposition block of parties, on the other hand, failed to disturb this equilibrium and was unable to convince voters to change their preferences.

The 'exit, voice, and loyalty' equilibrium in the 2023 Turkish elections requires multidimensional analysis along two dimensions, each interacting with and mutually reinforcing the other: the economy-identity nexus and the domestic-external nexus. We contend that a particularistic and isolated approach would lead to incomplete policy recommendations toward a possible re-democratization of the country. A caveat is in order, however. We use the 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework as an 'analytic tool' and not as a 'predictive tool,' aiming to determine tipping points for each option empirically.[6] In the spirit of Hirschman's approach, we focus on the multiple but interrelated sources of the resilience of authoritarian populism in Turkey, even if this analysis might 'sacrifice' some 'predictive power.'[7]

When do governance crises fail to undermine authoritarian populism?

The early years of the AKP government were marked by significant economic success. An unusually favorable international environment contributed to strong economic growth, and the high growth was also enabled by a stabilized economy and significant regulatory reforms. Financial stability, the fiscal discipline of the state, improvements in total factor productivity, and the ability to bring inflation down to single-digit levels fostered sustained economic growth.[8] Also, improvements in poverty and income inequality further boosted AKP's electoral performance (Figure 2; also see Öniş 2012).

However, from about 2015 onwards, a familiar 'populist cycle,' previously associated with both majoritarian and coalition governments in Turkish economic history, became ascendant. More specifically, the formal transition to the presidential regime in June 2018 was accompanied by accelerating institutional erosion and rising macroeconomic instability. Major currency shocks were experienced during the summer of 2018 and November 2021. Inflation also soared following a series of interest rate cuts by the Central Bank starting in December 2021. Attempts to stabilize the exchange rate through the backdoor interventions of the central bank depleted the foreign currency reserves. Furthermore, contrary to the government's expectations, the depreciation of the Turkish lira failed to improve a sizable current account deficit, thus rendering the growth process more fragile and unsustainable (Figure 1).

Macroeconomic volatility has been associated with growing income and wealth inequality. After noticeable improvement in the early AKP era, the Gini coefficient started to deteriorate in the 2010s (Figure 2), culminating in a major distributive shock with the introduction of the 'new economic model' in December 2021. Turkey is one of the most unequal countries among its peers. According to the World Inequality database

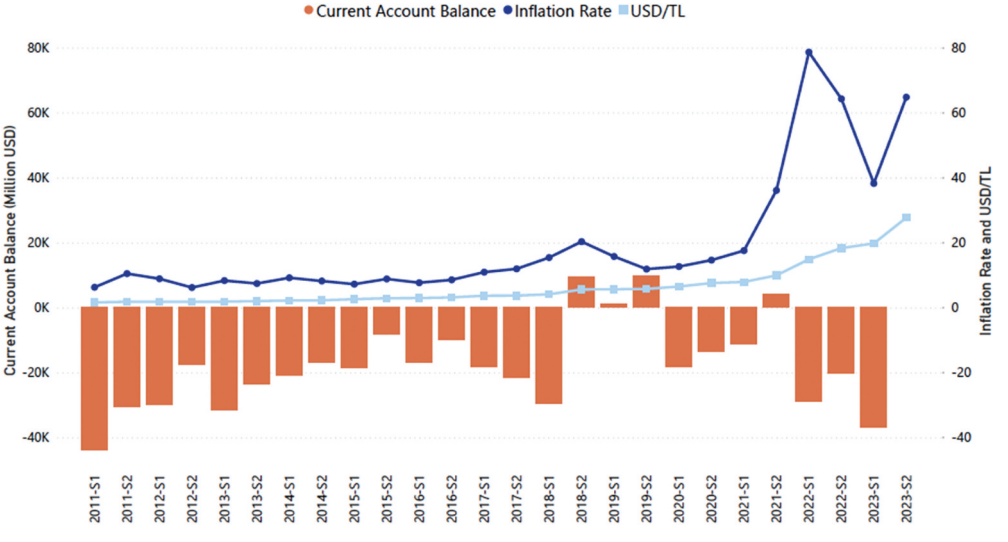

Figure 1. Rising inflation, depreciating Turkish lira, and current account deficit. Source: Figure based on TCMB data.

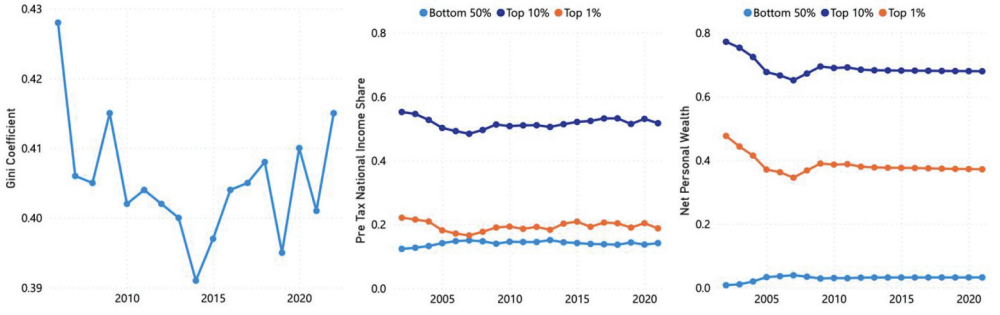

Figure 2. Gini co-efficient, income and wealth inequality in Turkey. Source: Figures based on TÜİK and WID data. Gini co-efficient data from TÜİK; income and wealth data from World Inequality database.

estimates, the top 1% of the population receives 18.8% of the national income, and the bottom 50% gets just 14.2% (versus 22.2 and 9.2% for Brazil, 15.2 and 19.3% for Poland, 23.8 and 15.7% for Russia, 11.1 and 22.5% for Hungary).[9] Figure 2 demonstrates that wealth distribution in Turkey is even more concerning. In this already disturbingly unequal distributional context, the urban poor and middle classes have had to bear the burden of the skyrocketing cost of living and the dwindling purchasing power of their real incomes. The growing pressure on the middle classes was particularly significant. For example, the ratio of the average monthly gross salary of higher education graduates compared to that of primary and secondary school graduates declined from 2.61 in 2014 to 1.82 in 2022 (Euronews 2024).

Governance problems have not been confined to the economic sphere. The massive earthquake that hit 11 cities in Southeast Turkey three months before the May 2023 elections exposed the organizational failures of state institutions. According to official figures, fifty thousand people died because of the earthquake. This was admittedly a natural disaster of enormous magnitude, but human costs could have been significantly reduced if appropriate precautions were taken in the first place. Following the devastating August 1999 earthquake, regulations were strengthened, and new codes specified higher construction standards. However, the improved regulations and standards were loosely implemented. Also, just five years before the earthquake, the government introduced 'a "zoning reconciliation" […] for builders whose constructions did not meet official building codes' (Ertas 2023, 6). Based on the logic of obtaining electoral support in the short run, periodic amnesty laws legitimized poor construction and thus led to massive human losses (Ülgen 2023). Other countries experiencing earthquakes of similar magnitude (e.g., Chile) registered much lower death tolls than Turkey in 2023. Criticisms were also leveled at the scale and intensity of relief efforts, especially in the early days. More lives could have been saved if state agencies had better coordination with civil initiatives and Turkey's sizable military force had been deployed more actively (Tol 2023).

Under normal circumstances, the popularity of any government would have been seriously tarnished in the face of such significant shocks. Given the potentially solid reasons for voters to express discontent, the May 2023 elections are interesting, if not puzzling. Overall, pro-Erdoğan voters remained loyal to the regime, expressed limited voice, and dismissed exit as a principal way to show discontent.

Any analysis should start with the obvious point that the cost of voice varies significantly according to the regime type. Turkey has become one of the resilient cases of authoritarian populism in the 2010s (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman 2023). The country has shown significant democratic backsliding over the last decade, progressively restricting the exercise of the voice option for citizens. According to the 2023 V-Dem report, Turkey ranked 141st among 179 countries in the liberal democracy index.[10] The independence of the judiciary and the media, protection of political rights and civil liberties, and fair treatment of the opposition as legitimate actors on the political scene have been progressively undermined (Özbudun 2015; Esen and Gumuscu 2023). Also, the government has frequently used the state's coercive power and legal instruments to restrict mass protests (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2020). The erosion of democratic rule on multiple fronts and increasing government control on the economic sphere, as a result, created an increasingly difficult political environment for citizens to exercise voice option.[11]

The remaining democratic ingredient is periodic elections. The playing field is highly skewed in favor of the government, and elections are not fair, but the ability to win elections still constitutes a significant legitimizing feature of the regime in a country that is not rich in natural resources. Victory in elections opens considerable space to exercise political power beyond what would normally be associated with liberal or electoral democracies. At the same time, winning the most votes allows the leader and the governing coalition to withstand criticism of the system as undemocratic and unaccountable. Under a similar logic, any criticism from external actors is portrayed as a violation of national sovereignty and can generate a backlash of nationalist sentiment operating in favor of the party in power.

All these suggest voters may pay a high price if they choose the voice and exit options. That said, in the recent Turkish elections, government supporters also had considerable incentives to maintain their loyalty. The first relates to the depth of the economic 'crisis.' The economic problems were significant but not acute enough to completely undermine Erdoğan and the ruling coalition. There was no collapse of economic growth or dramatic surge in unemployment, partly because of considerable credit expansion and growing external debt (Figure 3; also see Öniş and Kutlay 2021, 507–512, 522). To promote growth, the government utilized cheap credits to households and domestic firms and 'relied on loose bank regulatory standards' (Coban 2023, 1045). Economic growth continued under the new presidential regime, albeit in a highly unstable fashion (Öniş 2023). Taking advantage of political centralization, the ability to resume growth at whatever long-term cost meant significant segments of society continued to benefit from the regime and were naturally willing to endorse it in the general elections.

We should also place the role of economic factors in a broader historical context. Erdoğan and the AKP have been in power for two decades. Given the continuous growth over this period (except in 2009; see Figure 3), many people have benefited economically from the AKP rule. The primary beneficiaries have been the new segments of the bourgeoisie with close ties to the party. This has also facilitated the implementation of various redistributive mechanisms and social assistance benefits, enabling the construction of a cross-class coalition for electoral support (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman 2023, 82–4). Apart from utilizing conventional redistributive mechanisms and investments in large-scale infrastructure, the government

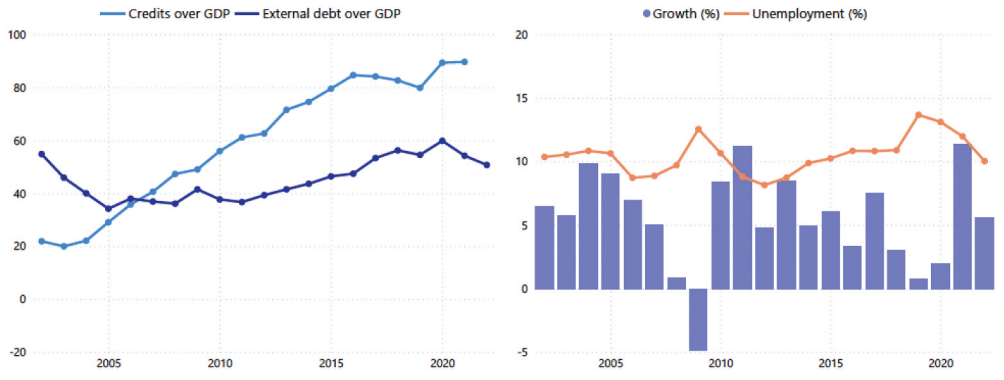

Figure 3. Positive growth and stable unemployment despite economic fluctuations. Source: 'Credits over GDP' data retrieved from the Bank of International Settlements; 'external debt over GDP' data retrieved from the Ministry of Treasury and Finance; 'growth' and 'unemployment' data retrieved from the World Bank, World Development Indicators database.

also established new institutions to maintain popular support. A striking illustration is in the realm of universities. Under AKP, the university sector has expanded dramatically, and a new university has opened in almost every city. There are 204 (public and private) universities in 2023, compared to 74 in 2002.[12] The move has been popular because it has created additional economic activity in several cities, opened new avenues of employment for many individuals and given students new opportunities. While the optimality of this significant university expansion is open to criticism, a certain political logic clearly underlies the process (for an extensive discussion, see Tekerek 2023).

The fact that growth continued, albeit in a highly fragile fashion, allowed the government to engineer a variety of populist redistributive moves in the period leading up to the elections, and this mitigated the impact of economic difficulties. One prominent example, the Law on Early Retirement, was popular, as it allowed around 2.2 million people to retire earlier and claim a pension. Another example was an increase in minimum wages and pensions for retired government employees. In this case, the government's strategy was to use populist redistribution to win the electoral contest first and then implement an austerity program to cover the fiscal costs of rising redistribution following the elections. The government's earthquake strategy, similarly, involved massive housing projects based on the promise of early delivery, capitalizing on the strength of the construction sector. As a result, in the May 2023 elections, the support for Erdoğan and the AKP in the earthquake regions was much higher than many analysts anticipated.[13] Ultimately, the government was not punished by its supporters because the economic crisis was not deep enough and had not been felt evenly across the country. The high cost of living, especially rents for housing, was a significant problem in major metropolitan centers, but the impact was more subdued in rural areas and smaller towns in the country's inner regions (for details, see Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman 2023; Öniş 2023).

The AKP government also pursued active social engineering policies to tilt the balance in favor of loyalty and against voice and exit. Controlling and manipulating the public information space played an instrumental role in these efforts. Although the government

did not successfully manage the economy, it could shape public debates on the matter through its domination over the conventional media.[14] According to the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Turkey ranked 165th among 180 countries in 2023.[15] Only a minor segment of the mainstream media associated with the opposition was able to voice criticism. Most media outlets assisted the government in distorting the information ecosystem and conveying the message of effective economic management despite adverse global conditions.[16] For example, inflation was much higher in Turkey than elsewhere, but it was portrayed as a 'problem for the whole world, not only Turkey,' suggesting global factors, not the government's poor economic decisions, were responsible for high inflation, and the government was doing its best to bring it under control (Gazete Duvar 2022). In addition, a common explanation of currency instability was the interference of foreign agents, again shifting responsibility from the domestic to the international domain (Öniş and Kutlay 2021, 516; also see Söylemez-Karakoç and Angın 2023).

The perceptions of citizens are shaped by the information environment within which they are immersed. The same mechanism drove the earthquake discourse. Through the media, the government conveyed that the earthquake was 'the worst disaster of the century,' implying the losses incurred were beyond human intervention – drawing attention away from the underlying governance failures.[17] All these could be interpreted as an orchestrated attempt at maintaining loyalty to the government. At the same time, the shrinking public information space increased the cost of voice because those who criticized government policies, were often intimidated through pro-government media.

Beyond economy: bounded communities and the leadership dimension

The exit-voice-loyalty equilibrium is also informed by identity-related factors, which were likely to tilt the balance in favor of loyalty. Turkey is a profoundly polarized country (Somer 2019; Aydın-Düzgit and Balta 2019; Erdoğan and Semerci 2018). The presence of deep-seated cultural cleavages in Turkish politics, framed as 'bounded communities' (Öniş 2015, 2023) or *kulturkampf* (Kalaycıoğlu 2011), complements the impact of objective economic factors, such as the dislocating effects of an ongoing economic shock on electoral behavior. We argue the 'bounded communities' argument, when interpreted in a nuanced way, can explain Erdoğan's ability to gain an edge over his rivals in the May 2023 elections. As we see it, identity-related factors in a deeply polarized nation operated in combination with subtle but more immediate concerns related to perceived material benefits and social status, both of which generated loyalty. As Hirschman (1970, 78–79) cogently underlines, loyalty is 'profoundly' different from 'faith' in that 'in comparison to that act of pure faith, the most loyalist behaviour retains an enormous dose of reasoned calculation.'

Loyalty is also a function of past performance rather than a photographic analysis of the present situation. Again, in the words of Hirschman (1970, 91), 'Demand is of course always likely to be a function not only of current, but to some extent also of previous, quality because of inertia and lags in perception.' This means the shadow of recent past looms over the current performance legitimacy of the incumbent, especially in contexts where the opposition fails to develop a credible counter-narrative. As explained above, conservative segments of Turkish society have benefited from AKP rule, enjoying a

marked improvement in their economic, social, and political status. As a result, informed by the AKP's earlier performance legitimacy, they have developed a strong attachment to their leader. Hence, even amidst economic disturbance, the electoral threshold for the AKP did not fall below 35%, a higher figure than the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – CHP), could ever generate.

In May 2023, the logic of bounded communities and a leadership cult operated in an interactive way to determine the outcome of a closely fought contest. In the domestic sphere, Erdoğan's leadership style and political astuteness helped swing the pendulum in his direction at a difficult moment in two critical respects. The first was his ability to forge effective coalitions. In the lead-up to the elections, he added new dimensions to his governing coalition, notably ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious conservative segments. This allowed him to pass the 50% threshold even though AKP itself was declining. The second was his ability to fragment and discredit the opposition through 'agenda shifting.' Based on a population-based survey experiment, Aytaç (2021, 1517) found that 'when the incumbent highlighted the security challenges Turkey has been facing and downplayed the importance of the economy in our experiment, respondents perceived the economy as less important and reported higher approval of the government's economic policies.' This seemed to be at work in the 2023 elections, too. Erdoğan used harsh language and framed the opposition block as a national security problem. A striking example was the association of Kılıçdaroğlu with the PKK terrorist organization in a fabricated video shown by Erdoğan at a political rally (Ünker and Sparrow 2023). Although Kılıçdaroğlu wanted to reach Kurdish constituencies, he was clearly critical of the PKK as a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, most ordinary voters had a different image of Kılıçdaroğlu because of Erdoğan's manipulation of the public information space. In a larger sense, this manipulation points to the decline of ethical standards under authoritarian populism.

International context: domestic politics-foreign policy linkages

Erdoğan expanded the narrative debate to the foreign policy realm to fragment and paralyze the opposition block. In this sense, a series of concerted efforts by the media and state institutions to position Erdoğan as a 'global leader' of a 'strong and independent Turkey' helped contain the discontent of the pro-government voters. It is often claimed that foreign policy plays a residual role in shaping political preferences, as more immediate and proximate domestic concerns dominate the electoral landscape (for a review, see Aldrich et al. 2006). However, the subtle interactions between domestic politics and foreign policy can be instrumental in generating and promoting loyalty for the incumbent. In the Turkish case, Erdoğan is well known for his astuteness in exploiting the 'populist dividend' in foreign policy to gain an additional political edge in domestic politics (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a).

The May 2023 elections were no exception. The foreign policy developments in the run-up to the elections and the way Erdoğan narrated them on the domestic front – with the assistance of the pro-government media – informed the exit-loyalty balance in the eyes of the electorate. Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy has been the operating logic in Turkish foreign policy in recent years. The basic idea is that Turkey will continue a transactional relationship with the West whilst deepening its economic, diplomatic, and security ties with the non-Western world in a post-liberal international order. Turkey has

positioned itself as a BRICS-like country, playing a more active role in the global South but formally embedded in Western institutions. Accordingly, Turkish foreign policy has become more assertive, with the government (selectively but more frequently) engaging in normative contestation with Western actors (Aydın-Düzgit 2023). Also, Turkish-made drones joined the fight against the PKK, extending these efforts beyond the country's borders to the inner regions of Syria. They have been effective in the initial phase of the Russia-Ukraine war, defending Kyiv against Russian aggression, and proved instrumental in tilting the balance in favor of Azerbaijan during its war with Armenia (Ciftci 2023, 764–765). Together, these elements have projected a techno-nationalist image of a strong country that is no longer dependent on the West for its security and can act independently not just in its immediate neighborhood but also in more distant locales (also see Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol 2023).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed Erdoğan to bolster this image in the short run and contributed to his electoral fortunes by diverting attention from ongoing economic difficulties at home. Since the Russia-Ukraine war started in 2022, Turkey has capitalized on its position of simultaneously maintaining relations with Russia and Ukraine.[18] Turkey has taken a clear anti-war stance, but its position has been based on neutrality. This has allowed Ankara to position itself as a mediating actor in the conflict, pushing toward compromise and peace. An important achievement in this context was the formulation of the International Grain Agreement and the shipment of Ukrainian grain through Turkey to the global South, especially to African countries. Even though the agreement was not renewed when it ended in June 2023, Ankara's contributions have been acknowledged by actors on both sides of the conflict.

In addition, Turkey has remained an important partner for the West, playing a role in the NATO enlargement process precipitated by the Russia-Ukraine War. Turkey, for a long time, opposed the membership bids of Sweden and Finland because these two countries, notably Sweden, were not sensitive to Turkey's security concerns, especially concerns about the terrorist activities of the PKK. The Finnish application was endorsed by Turkey shortly before the May elections. Importantly, these independent actions, at a time when anti-Western sentiments were on the rise, generated a handsome populist dividend on the domestic front, helping to bolster the popularity of Erdoğan in the period leading up to the May 2023 elections. Ironically, the opposition reduced the cost of foreign policy oscillations for the government by following the footsteps of Erdoğan, leaving little incentive for pro-government voters to exercise the exit option and vote for the opposition because of foreign policy-related concerns (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a, 1099–1102).

Erdoğan's balancing act between Russia and the West since 2022 has bolstered his international standing and helped to shield malpractice in domestic politics. Western actors, increasingly concerned with their security challenges, want to keep Turkey on their side against Russia, so Erdoğan has had considerable space to maneuver in domestic politics. In this context, the government capitalized on the idea of a strong and independent Turkey in its propaganda efforts during the run-up to the elections. The 'Century of Turkey' (*Türkiye Yüzyılı*) became the new buzzword, Turkish drones were celebrated, and new symbols were added. For example, TOGG, Turkey's first indigenous electric car, produced by a national consortium of private firms supported by the state, was projected as emblematic of a new wave of national champions. TOGG started

production in October 2022, and cars arrived on the market in March 2023. Another symbol was Turkey's domestically built light aircraft and drone carrier, TCG Anadolu, which was opened to public visits shortly before the elections (Hurriyet Daily News 2023).

Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol (2023) demonstrated that techno-nationalism and investments in indigenous defense technologies also have a positive effect on boosting the government's political survival. The list of these 'national champions' projects could be extended. What is important for our purposes is that the average voter appears to be impressed by the government's projection of national power and prestige. Techno-nationalism became an effective instrument for the government to generate loyalty amidst the narrative battles in the preelection context. There was, for instance, an interesting public debate in the election cycle on 'TOGG versus onions.' Whilst the government widely promoted national developmentalism epitomized by the TOGG project, the opposition block focused on the impact of high inflation on the living standards of ordinary people, symbolized by the striking increase in the price of onions. The election results suggest that projections of national pride based on symbols like TOGG resonated more with ordinary voters who were unevenly affected by the economic difficulties.

Unity of the governing block versus fragmented opposition block

The cost of exit should finally be examined as a function of uncertainty. The scope of political-economic uncertainty associated with a possible exit decision among pro-government voters partly depends on how the opposition frames its policies and whether it offers a genuine alternative vision. In the run-up to the May 2023 elections, the opposition encountered a highly uneven playing field in a predominantly authoritarian populist environment. As previously mentioned, media information campaigns tilted the balance in the government's favor, and the incumbent drew on state resources. However, a balanced account must also identify the opposition's strategic mistakes both before and after the election process.

In a country where the culture of compromise is traditionally in short supply, and the experience with coalition governments in the 1970s and the 1990s is often associated in the public mind with severe economic and political instabilities, six opposition parties managed to come together and formed a united opposition block: the Nation Alliance. The leader of the main opposition party (CHP) played a leading role in assembling the Nation Alliance. The CHP was mainly a left-wing party, but the alliance included five parties on the right side of the political spectrum. The most critical was the Good Party (Iyi Party – IYIP) led by Meral Akşener. This party broke from the Nationalist Action Party when the latter formed a coalition with the AKP as part of the People's Alliance. Akşener's vision was moderately conservative and had strong nationalistic overtones. Smaller parties in the Nation Alliance included the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi* – GP), the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi* – DEVA), and the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi* – SP). The GP and DEVA were led by former AKP members Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan. Both had served in key ministerial positions in AKP governments. SP, led by Temel Karamollaoğlu, represented an alternative version of Islamist conservatism. All these parties on the right appealed to moderate religious

conservative segments of society and were likely to attract voters away from the ruling coalition. The final member of the Nation Alliance was the Democratic Party led by Gültekin Uysal.

Both Kılıçdaroğlu and Akşener, as leaders of the larger parties, made a gallant effort to bring different ideologies together to overcome the problem of bounded communities, which has historically presented itself along religious (conservative-secular) and ethnic (Turkish-Kurdish) faultlines. For historical and socio-political reasons, the CHP alone could not appeal to conservative voters in much of the country, and its appeal in Kurdish regions was minimal. Hence, forming a strategic alliance with parties on the right of the political spectrum constituted an effort to overcome identity divisions and create a common platform for democratic revival.[19]

The Nation Alliance announced its electoral strategy at the end of March, and Kılıçdaroğlu was endorsed as the presidential candidate. The Alliance orchestrated a vibrant campaign in April and early May using slogans such as 'My promise to you, Spring will come again' and 'Mr Kemal will stand by his promise.' The opposition block, pursuing a 'big tent' approach, pledged tolerance and inclusivity to create a country based on mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. Indeed, the Nation Alliance appeared to be doing well, and some opinion polls suggested the opposition block might win, albeit by a small margin (Kızılkaya and Bakiler 2023). If the Alliance had won, this would have been a dramatic change, leading to the possibility of a genuine democratic renewal. From a broader international perspective, an opposition victory would have enormous significance, as it would point toward the possibility of reversing democratic backsliding purely based on domestic political dynamics, with external actors, such as the US or the EU, playing no significant role. Ultimately, however, the first round was a disappointment for the Alliance. It presented a substantial challenge to the incumbent but was unable to overcome the formidable power of the governing block and the personal appeal of Erdoğan. Once the results of the first round were available, hopes for the second round largely evaporated.

In retrospect, the opposition's election campaign was plagued by strategic mistakes. First and foremost, the choice of the presidential candidate was heavily criticized. The announcement of the candidate was delayed. Moreover, the conflict over the name of the candidate, leading to the temporary departure of Akşener from the 'Table of Six,' suggested disunity and fragmentation, something Erdoğan exploited in his electoral campaign. Opinion polls suggested Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, could have been a better choice and would have broader appeal.[20] Akşener also pushed in this direction to no avail. The Lula example in Brazil illustrates the importance of a united opposition rallied around a charismatic leader. Although post-election counterfactual analysis is difficult, the outcome of the Turkish elections could have been different had an alternative candidate been announced much earlier.

Beyond the role of agency, the Alliance was overly bureaucratic and procedural in its operations. It put too much emphasis on replacing the presidential system with an alternative form of government under the rubric of a 'strengthened parliamentary system.' This project was far distant from the concerns of the average voter. In addition, the Alliance's overemphasis on equality among opposition partners and its proposal to grant veto powers to all party leaders as 'vice presidents' in the event of a government change raised questions about the capacity of the Alliance to deliver effectively. At a

deeper level, ideological differences divided the six parties, making cooperation and united action difficult and naturally raising the question of what they would do in government, especially given the previous negative experiences of coalition governments. For example, CHP's left-leaning interventionist, redistribution-based policies were not entirely in sync with the neoliberal, free-market orientation of DEVA. Moreover, there was a rift between IYIP and CHP on the topic of engagement with Kurdish political constituencies. Whilst CHP leadership favored closer engagement with the Kurdish actors (but keeping them outside the formal Alliance), Akşener and IYIP were vehemently opposed. These inherent ideological differences and overly bureaucratic architecture became a stumbling block for the Alliance. Erdoğan and the ruling block inevitably capitalized on what appeared to be the underlying disunity and fragmentation of the opposition. All these suggest that the opposition bloc failed to deliver a credible political and economic counter-narrative, decreasing the uncertainty for those who might consider voting for the opposition instead of continuing to support the incumbent.

Resilience versus reversibility: Turkish experience in a comparative perspective

The May 2023 elections in Turkey provide an interesting example of how exit, voice, and loyalty options play out under authoritarian populism. The wave of right-wing populism led by strongmen is a global phenomenon, and several common elements tend to tie these leaders and their associated regimes together. At the same time, however, domestic contexts matter and significantly influence the evolution of such regimes. The recent elections in four countries, the United States in November 2020, Hungary in April 2022, Brazil in October 2022, and Turkey in May 2023, are particularly telling. The fact that two significant authoritarian populist leaders, Donald Trump (the US) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), lost their seats suggests a democratic turn is possible under certain assumptions.[21] At the same time, the victories of Viktor Orban (Hungary) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey) imply an exit from authoritarian right-wing populism may become increasingly difficult as these parties prove to be resilient and durable in specific national contexts.

What factors explain the variations between these cases? When do exit and voice cease to be plausible strategies for the voters? A brief comparative analysis of the Turkish case leads to five tentative propositions.[22] The first focuses on the duration of authoritarian political leader and their political party in power. The longer the leader and the party rule, the more difficult it becomes for the opposition to win elections. As populist leaders win successive elections, the regime will move from a flawed democracy toward some form of authoritarianism, and this, in turn, will considerably reduce the space available for opposition actors to exercise voice option. Among the world's current right-wing populist leaders, Erdoğan has been the longest-serving, at more than 20 years; Orban is the second in line, having been in office since 2010. An extended period in office allows the entrenchment of clientelistic ties, and significant segments of society will derive varying degrees of economic benefits from their association with patronage networks. For example, the long tenure of Viktor Orban enabled him to restructure state-market relations in a way that led to growing state interventionism (Csaba 2022). Also, as leaders consolidate their power, they dominate the public information space, investing in pro-

government media and building the capacity to weaken, fragment, and discredit the opposition (for more on the case of Hungary, see Scheppele 2022).

In the US and Brazilian cases, right-wing populist leaders were in office for a single electoral cycle. It is possible to suggest that if Trump or Bolsonaro had won the second election, the authoritarian nature of their respective measures would have deepened, making a potential reversal in the future more difficult. For example, Trump's campaign in the run up to the 2024 elections is an indication of the potential challenges American democracy is likely to face if he becomes President again. This brings us to a second proposition: the more profound the extent of the democratic decline, the more difficult it becomes to reverse it because the cost of voice significantly increases for the voters who dare to challenge the incumbent. Despite the challenges posed by the Trump phenomenon, the US has continued to enjoy liberal democracy in the form of a strong and largely independent judicial system that protects the right to freedom of expression and political protest.[23] To varying degrees, similar characteristics are found in Brazil. In the Brazilian case, whilst powerful interests backed Bolsonaro, he lacked the necessary party machinery – as well as time span – to build well-entrenched clientelistic ties, institutionalize his power base, and pack the courts and media with coteries. This had a major impact in terms of the exit-voice equilibrium that conditioned the preferences of voters.

The third proposition is that a powerful opposition block led by a charismatic leader that develops a credible counter-narrative can overcome the incumbent. The Brazilian case clearly illustrates this; a popular presidential figure from an earlier period was able to challenge Bolsonaro. A less charismatic candidate could have easily lost the elections, as in 2018. In both the Hungarian and Turkish cases, the opposition leaders lacked the charisma or the personal appeal required to unite factions or to challenge the natural charm of the respective leaders, Erdoğan and Orban. Without neglecting the constraining role of institutional structures and the limited political space for any form of opposition to exercise voice, it takes effective leadership – as a necessary but not sufficient condition – to reduce political uncertainty, gain voters' trust, and convince them to place their loyalty elsewhere.

Our fourth proposition is that even if opposition to the regime is significant, the chances of removing the authoritarian populist leaders are slim if the opposition parties portray a fragmented image. In Hungary and Turkey, the opposition achieved victories in municipal elections but was unable to defeat the incumbents in subsequent national elections. In their framing of the national elections, the incumbents portrayed the governing block as representing national unity and the opposition as representing disunity and weakness in terms of capacity to govern. This helped to tilt the balance in favor of the incumbents. In contrast, in the American and Brazilian contexts, the strength and mobilisation capacity of the opposition block played a consequential role in the elections.

A final proposition is that even in the American and Brazilian cases, the phenomenon of right-wing populist leaders is not over. In the US case, Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, but the legacy of Trumpism lingers, and he promises to be a threat in the 2024 election. In the Brazilian case, Bolsonaro has been barred from political competition for ten years, but this does not preclude the possibility that a Bolsonaro-type figure may emerge and win the next elections. Hunter and Power (2023, 130), for instance, point out that 'the October 2022 elections [in Brazil] arguably saw the strongest overall performance by the political right since the military regime ended almost forty

years ago.' We should also remember that these two former leaders were not willing to relinquish power, even though they lost their elections – albeit by narrow margins. The Capitol Hill riots engineered by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021, and the Bolsonaro supporters storming the National Congress in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 elections are striking examples.

Conclusion: a new path or path stabilization?

In this article, we examined how Erdoğan managed to tilt the equilibrium in his favor in the May 2023 elections. We used Albert O. Hirschman's 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework to demonstrate that loyalty to the incumbent generated considerable benefits for Turkish voters despite accumulating governance failures, depending on the degree and strength of their connections to the government. At the same time, the opposition block failed to reduce voter uncertainty and overcome trust issues by offering a genuine alternative to the incumbent. In fact, nationalism based on symbols of national unity, grandeur, and strength appeared to have more appeal among the electorate than arguments of justice, pluralism, and peaceful co-existence. The unity of the governing block dominated by a popular presidential figure overrode a sizable yet ultimately fragmented opposition block.

We offered an analytic exercise to develop an integrated framework accounting for the puzzling outcome of the Turkish elections. We should note, however, that trends and patterns are easier to delineate in this type of ex post facto analysis. As Bernstein (1998, 334) aptly points out, 'After the fact (…) when we study the history of what happened, the source of the wildness appears to be so obvious to us that we have a hard time understanding how people on the scene were oblivious to what lay in wait for them.' In the Turkish case, it is, and arguably will remain, difficult to assign precise weights to the effect of each parameter shaping voter preferences. The interactions of these parameters are complex, and there is no easy way to reverse the current authoritarian turn in Turkish politics – also in global politics, for this matter. At the very least, pro-democratic opposition forces need to develop coherent and comprehensive counter-strategies spearheaded by effective leadership. The Turkish case shows what happens when they fail to do so.

What is the future of Turkish democracy in light of the exit-voice-loyalty calculus? President Erdoğan emerged as the winner and will likely continue to consolidate his position, deepening the authoritarian nature of the regime. When the results of the first round became available, the opposition immediately lost momentum, and the subsequent performance of Kılıçdaroğlu was counterproductive. First, in the interim period before the second round, he tried to capture part of the nationalist vote by adopting a rhetoric based on the promise of deporting all Syrian refugees over a short period. The nature and tone of his speeches sharply contrasted with arguments in previous campaign phases. Second, and even more significantly, he decided to hang onto power after the elections, and this generated deep resentment among the opposition voters. It would have been a much wiser decision to announce his resignation in the post-election phase, opening space for a new candidate to take over and provide a new direction and momentum to CHP and the opposition at large. After the elections, the Nation Alliance collapsed, and

the individual parties went their separate ways. Many voters were disgruntled, and those who had exercised the voice option found themselves in difficulty due to the disappointing post-election indifference of the opposition block. This bitter feeling of abandonment leaves 'private' exit the more likely option for many voters who supported the opposition block. In this context, especially for young and educated Turks, exit may take two forms in the post-election equilibrium. First, it might involve moving out of the country and seeking opportunities elsewhere.[24] This form of exit is 'silent,' but its long-term consequences are 'noisy' because it incurs significant costs for the country due to the depleted human capital. This trend, if not reversed, is likely to exacerbate the scale of the brain drain the country has already been experiencing.[25] In the end, individuals will choose to exit if they think 'the cost of using voice' or their 'exit payoff (…) is sufficiently large' (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017, 725). A similar logic applies to large capital holders. Second, we may see increasing de-politicization and a retreat to the private sphere as another form of exit for opposition groups. Under this scenario, as laid out in the first part of the paper, exit may further undermine voice. In our view, this is a likely development that will have adverse implications for Turkish democracy. If voters, especially intellectuals, well-educated middle classes, and younger segments of society, start believing 'they have nowhere to go' and the incumbent is the only option, this will shore up the regime's resilience despite apparent governance failures.

An important question in this context is whether the government will embark on a new path to address Turkey's multiple governance crises. Certain signs signal a possible change in this regard. On the economic front, the new Erdoğan government has made some policy adjustments. One of Erdoğan's early moves in his new term has been to appoint people with substantial connections to Western financial circles to critical economic posts. Mehmet Şimşek, a former Finance Minister, was appointed Minister of Treasury and Finance, along with some other important changes in economic bureaucracy.

On the foreign policy front, some steps suggest a desire to improve relations with key Western actors, albeit on a narrow transactional basis. However, these policy adjustments should be considered path stabilization; as such, they are unlikely to change the direction of state-market relations in the Turkish political economy, the institutional context of Turkish politics, or the transactionalist turn in Turkish foreign policy. Western actors also seem to accept this narrow transactional pattern. The previous rhetoric, with its references to democracy and human rights, appears to have been relegated to the backseat, opening up more space for the governing coalition in the domestic sphere. Given the current domestic and international dynamics, the emergence of a new pro-democratic path is unlikely unless opposition parties engage in a process of moral soul-searching, intellectual restoration, and institutional reform to give a new life to 'the art of voice' in Turkish politics.

Notes

1. For full elaboration of the 'multiple governance crisis' in Turkey, see Kutlay and Öniş (2021b), Öniş and Kutlay (2021), and Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman (2023).
2. On the extraordinary resilience of authoritarian regimes formed through 'violent liberation struggles,' see Levitsky and Way (2012).
3. The elegance of the 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework is that, in Adelman's words, 'it [has] that unique mix of being quickly grasped while exploding in many directions' (Adelman 2013, 440). Hirschman is a leading scholar well known for his desire and inspiring abilities to 'trespass' on social science disciplines. For a collection of his essays on the topic, see Hirschman (1981). For excellent reviews of Hirschman's life, works, and legacy, see Özçelik (2014) and Adelman (2013).
4. Also see Hirschman (1970, 84–5).
5. See Hirschman (1978, 103–5). Hirschman also discusses the interplay between exit and voice in reference to the debate on public and private schools (Hirschman 1970, 44–54). Also, see Hirschman (1993) for an application of the 'seesaw exit-voice model' to the case of German Democratic Republic.
6. For more on Hirschman's model as an 'analytic' and 'predictive tool,' see Dowding et al. (2000).
7. For more on the 'complexity' and 'predictive power' of social sciences, see Hirschman (1982).
8. It is, however, important to underline that the early AKP governments failed to adopt active industrial policies to upgrade Turkey's production and trade structure toward high-value-added sectors. Moreover, some critical privatization decisions proved short-sighted, leading to significant problems. For more on this, see Toksöz, Kutlay, and Hale (2023, chapter 4). For the increase in total factor productivity in the early 2000s, see Acemoğlu and Üçer (2021).
9. All estimates are from 2021. All figures are estimated according to pretax national income.
10. For details, see https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf
11. For an in-depth discussion on the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of 'state capture' and 'market capture', see Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman (2023).
12. Data retrieved from the Higher Education Council website: https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr
13. In the second round of the 2023 presidential elections, Erdoğan's vote shares in eleven cities hit by the earthquake were similar to the 2018 presidential elections. Erdoğan even slightly increased his vote share in nine out of these eleven cities. Only in Gaziantep and Kilis did his vote shares slightly decline compared to the 2018 presidential elections. Also, in all cities (except for Diyarbakır, Hatay and Adana), Erdoğan's vote shares were significantly higher than his overall vote share.
14. For an in-depth assessment of the increasing 'press-party parallelism' in Turkey under the AKP rule, see Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu (2021). In a systematic empirical assessment based on individual-level data collected in 2018, Yagci and Oyvat (2020, 6) found that 'progovernment media viewers are more likely to assess the national economy favourably compared to their own pocketbook.'
15. For details, see https://rsf.org/en/map-2023-world-press-freedom-index
16. For a comparative assessment of the government's blame-shifting strategies in handling the economic problems, see Söylemez-Karakoç and Angın (2023).
17. For example, see Erdoğan (2023).
18. Turkey's growing bilateral ties with Russia deserve special mention. The two countries are positioned on opposite camps in some of the key regional conflicts. Yet, they also developed close cooperation on critical economic, political, and security issues. For an in-depth analysis of Turkey-Russia relations, see Köstem (2022).
19. In comparative terms, the opposition block in Turkey was much more broadly based than its Hungarian counterpart. The Hungarian opposition was made up mainly of left-wing and liberal-leaning groups. The Turkish opposition included parties on the political spectrum's

left and right. The vote share of the opposition bloc in Turkey in the presidential elections was considerably more than the share obtained by Péter Márki-Zay in the comparable Hungarian elections of April 2022 from which Viktor Orban emerged the outright winner.

20. According to Metropoll, a survey company in Turkey, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was consistently behind Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu in the polls as the opposition candidate against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. See, Tuncer (2022).
21. Poland constitutes another important case involving the possibility of reversal of authoritarian populism. In the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023, the opposition block secured 54% of the total votes, whilst the Law and Justice Party (PiS), which has been ruling the country for eight years, could claim only 35.4% of the vote. The recent election results point toward a significant divergence in the fortunes of Hungary and Poland, both of which had been experiencing democratic backsliding in recent years, with the qualification that the degree of democratic backsliding has been more pronounced in the Hungarian case.
22. This section aims to provide a panoramic view by drawing lessons from the Turkish case. Each proposition in this section could be examined more extensively through a systematic comparative design.
23. For a discussion on American political system and the critical role of 'gatekeeping' that historically has kept democracy on track, see Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019).
24. This form of exit is 'silent' and 'private.' It is, in fact, a 'private good in that it cannot be had through the exertions of others, as a result of some sort of free ride' (Hirschman 1993, 194).
25. For an informative analysis in this context, see Kirişci (2023).

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