

The 2024 Municipal Elections: Shifting Geopolitical Landscape in Türkiye

The 2024 municipal elections mark the beginning of an end of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) uncontested rule of the country, significantly reshaping Türkiye's geopolitical landscape. The election results cast doubt on President Erdoğan's political invincibility and his ability to 'turn the electoral tide' in his favor, given the formidable challenges that he faces. Although Erdoğan is expected to remain in power until the upcoming presidential elections in 2028, this notable electoral setback has left him politically vulnerable on both domestic and international fronts. President Erdoğan elevated the importance of regaining control of Istanbul to a matter of personal prestige. Although his name did not appear on the ballot, he invested his personal political capital in seeking to defeat the charismatic opposition candidate, Ekrem Imamoglu, only to suffer a resounding rejection at the polls.

While local elections typically carry less significance than national ones, Türkiye's 2024 local elections [transcended domestic dynamics](#), marking the onset of a new political era in the country. In a departure from past trends, the ruling AKP experienced a significant decline in popular support in Türkiye's 2024 local elections, [losing](#) its long-standing dominance since its rise to power in 2002. This shift in power dynamics saw the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), achieve a victory unprecedented in decades. The CHP not only prevailed in its traditional strongholds in urban centers and major cities but also attained its most remarkable [nationwide electoral success since 1977](#). Additionally, the growing popularity of a conservative Islamist party, New Welfare (YR), has contributed to the fragmentation of the electoral base of the ruling AKP party, marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape. These considerable changes in Türki-



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ye's electoral landscape not only alter Erdoğan's domestic political calculations but also impact his foreign policy options.

How will President Erdoğan, a veteran political survivor, respond to this shifting political landscape? How will his efforts to regain nationwide political support influence Türkiye's foreign policy? And what lessons should Georgia's political stakeholders learn from the country's local elections? These are all important questions that are highly relevant for further analysis.

Erdoğan's Foreign Policy Identity

A sound starting point for this discussion is to review the key characteristics of Erdoğan's foreign policy. Specifically, we need to look at two major trends that define his strategic approach – a gradual departure from the West and the skillful utilization of foreign policy as a tool to deflect attention from domestic challenges.

Since the AKP gained power in late 2002, its foreign policy has been anchored in what Erdoğan's former associate, Ahmed Davutoglu, [labels](#) a “strategic depth.” This notion asserts that Türkiye, as a major regional power, has overlooked its historical ties with neighboring regions at the expense of its partnership with the West. Hence, to reclaim its historical influence, Türkiye's political elites should not view [“their country as an appendage to a larger European whole”](#) but rather as a regional center of gravity – namely, an independent regional great power that extends its influence across the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia without solely positioning itself as a western power.

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The clear manifestation of this political outlook is Türkiye's foreign policy balancing act – characterized as Ankara's strategy of hedging. Like other middle powers, Ankara chooses to avoid strategic dependency on a single power pole by navigating through the conflicting interests of Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Erdoğan's Türkiye has been [acting](#) “like a non-aligned country in its foreign policy as a hedging middle power and pivotal state refusing to put all its eggs in the NATO basket.” This strategic approach, alongside positioning Türkiye as an independent actor in the context of great power competition, also aims to define its new geopolitical identity. In essence, under Erdoğan's leadership, Türkiye has [emerged as a post-Western power](#), steadily distancing itself from the Kemalist foreign policy tradition and gradually lessening its dependency on the West. Yet, this strategic shift should not be interpreted as Ankara's attempt to switch camps or alliances. Instead, Erdoğan [aims](#) to maintain a presence in opposing camps and leverage Türkiye's multifaceted identity to broaden its influence across the region.

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Alongside geopolitical factors, Erdoğan's foreign policy choices are also influenced by the conservative, religious values of his electoral base, particularly in Türkiye's hinterland – Anatolia. As [noted](#) by Soner Cagaptay, the renowned expert on Türkiye, “its (Erdoğan's) foreign policy represents the political and cultural sensitivities of Anatolians far removed from the secularist ethos of the elites who founded the country.” The rise of a new class of Anatolian elites has gradually overturned the decades-long tradition of secular, pro-Western policies rooted in Kemalist ideology. Unlike the more secular urban segments of society, the emerging Anatolian

elites do not [identify](#) themselves as Europeans, thus further distancing Türkiye's new geopolitical identity from the Western world. For populist leaders such as Erdoğan, this provides a conducive environment to leverage foreign policy by cultivating anti-Western sentiments for domestic political gains.

The most notable example of leveraging foreign policy for domestic political benefits was during the 2023 presidential elections where Erdoğan, as [remarked](#) by many observers, pursued one of the most anti-Western and anti-American campaigns ever. The anti-Western rhetoric is widely popular in Türkiye as it resonates not only within Erdoğan's power base but also with a broader segment of the population. However, for Erdoğan, playing the anti-Western card serves a distinct purpose. It allows Türkiye's long-serving leader to divert public attention from domestic challenges for which the Turkish President lacks viable solutions towards a common foreign enemy.

For a populist leader like Erdoğan, “foreign policy, beyond its traditional functions, [serves](#) as an important tool for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement.” Until the latest elections, his strategy of using foreign policy for domestic purposes had been effective. He succeeded in attributing the parlous state of the economy to external factors, primarily Western powers. By skillfully playing the ‘identity card,’ he effectively tapped into the conservative sentiments of Türkiye's public. Furthermore, he used foreign policy to evoke nationalist sentiments, thereby presenting considerable challenges for the opposition to respond effectively. Yet, the factors contributing to Erdoğan's victory in the highly contested 2023 presidential race did not translate into electoral success during the 2024 municipal elections. Whether due to the nature of municipal elections or the efforts of opposition leaders, he could not successfully shift the focus away from economic issues to concentrate solely on external factors or ‘identity’ politics.

Therefore, Erdoğan's failure to effectively deploy the well-tested 'identity card' played a significant role in shaping the outcomes of the 2024 elections.

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While the main reason for Erdoğan's failure to gain a desirable electoral outcome lies in the poor state of Türkiye's economy, there are additional factors that played a role in his electoral defeat. In particular, we note the unexpected electoral success of the conservative Islamist party, New Welfare (YR), led by Fatih Erbakan, son of Necmettin Erbakan, Erdoğan's former political mentor and a founder of the Islamist movement in contemporary Türkiye. Fatih Erbakan's decision to refrain from forming a coalition with Erdoğan, combined with his highly effective campaign, fractured the AKP's electoral base.

Ironically, the YR party leader employed the same strategies against Erdoğan as he had used against the opposition in previous elections. Fatih Erbakan leveraged foreign policy to undermine Erdoğan's standing, namely by alleging close collaboration between Türkiye and Israel, citing the growth in trade between the two nations. Additionally, he accused President Erdoğan of yielding to Western pressure and endorsing Sweden's NATO membership. In his election night speech, he particularly [emphasized](#) the continuation of trade with Israel and endorsement of Sweden's NATO membership as disgraceful actions by Türkiye's leadership. In a mirror image of Erdoğan's tactics, the YR leader succeeded in tapping into nationalist and religious sentiments within society to vilify his opponents by associating them with the interests of foreign powers.

The fragmentation of the conservative and Islamist electoral base presents a fresh challenge for President Erdoğan. While he will not face another election cycle in the immediate years ahead,

he must still address this challenge to strengthen his hold on power. The municipal election results considerably eroded his position and constrained his maneuverability. After the 2023 presidential elections, Türkiye was expected to improve its strained relationship with the United States and Europe. Given that Erdoğan did not face significant domestic challenges in the aftermath of the presidential elections, there were no incentives for him to antagonize the West further. As Soner Cagaptay explained, following his victory in the 2023 presidential elections, Erdoğan has [embarked](#) on the legacy-building phase of his career, which requires close collaboration with the West, creating momentum for improving strained ties.

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The outcomes of the 2024 municipal elections, however, alter this calculus. The consolidation of a fractured electoral base, particularly given the growing popularity of a new anti-Western, Islamist political party, may change these political dynamics. Given these circumstances, Erdoğan's ability to maneuver is curtailed. His attempts to mend fences and repair strained ties with the United States and Europe will affect his ability to regain control over his fractured electoral base. It is clear that other populist leaders, such as Fatih Erbakan, who have shown the ability to fragment AKP's electoral base, will exploit this to undermine Erdoğan's political brand. Given these circumstances, it seems that President Erdoğan's more feasible option is to persist with his well-tested strategy of leveraging anti-Western sentiments that have helped him to maintain his grip on power for years. Consequently, the prospects of improving Türkiye's relations with the West seem to be the primary casualty of Türkiye's 2024 municipal elections.

The Georgian Perspective

For Georgia, the landmark 2024 elections in Türkiye have two major implications. On the one hand, a shifting geopolitical landscape in Georgia's only NATO neighbor presents challenges for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. On the other hand, the opposition's victory in Türkiye's hybrid regime, characterized by an unlevel playing field and the misuse of state resources, offers valuable lessons for Georgia's opposition parties facing similar conditions ahead of the country's decisive 2024 parliamentary elections.

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In general, Türkiye's balancing act in foreign policy and its gradual departure from its Western identity is being viewed with growing concern by Georgia's pro-Western political circles. The importance of Türkiye for Georgia's security cannot be overstated as it stands not only as a strategic partner and NATO member but also as a physical land bridge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Hence, any indications of a decline in Turkish-NATO or, more broadly, in Turkish-Western relations further exacerbate the overall regional security environment from the Georgian perspective. Yet, the shift in Türkiye's foreign policy identity also has concrete ramifications on Georgia's domestic politics. President Erdoğan's multi-alignment foreign policy, manifested by his balanced approach towards Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, provides a context for Georgian authorities to justify their own deviation from the Western foreign policy course. While the domestic contexts of these foreign policy shifts vary significantly, they still offer Georgian authorities an opportunity to portray

their gradual departure from the Western course as part of a broader regional trend. This is particularly concerning given that Georgia's current alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy is historically low, significantly [lagging behind other candidate countries](#).

The opposition's victory in Türkiye resonates strongly across the region as the electoral defeats of long-standing political incumbents are rare occasions in this part of the world. Particularly, the defeat of President Erdoğan, renowned for his electoral invincibility and global political influence, stands out as a significant event that transcends the domestic dimension. These events inspire optimism and positive expectations among opposition forces throughout the region. Within the Georgian context, alongside inspiring optimism, these elections also offer practical insights for opposition parties ahead of the country's decisive 2024 parliamentary elections. Notably, they show how opposition forces can prevent a ruling party from diverting focus from pressing economic issues that concern citizens to 'identity politics' that instill fear in religiously conservative societies. In parallel, opposition leaders can see how to counter a ruling party's efforts to shift blame for domestic issues onto external factors by demonizing long-standing international allies.

Despite the differing socio-political contexts in Türkiye and Georgia, these lessons are important for the Georgian opposition to consider, given that autocratic leaders in the region tend to employ a similar 'playbook' to maintain their grip on power. Within this context, the municipal elections extend beyond the borders of Türkiye and acquire a regional dimension. The electoral setback experienced by the region's foremost political leader, President Erdoğan, not only reshapes the domestic political landscape of Türkiye but also inspires hope for those opposition forces across the region who are fighting entrenched political systems on a distinctly uneven playing field ■