



“The Times They Are A-Changin’”? Three Turkish Opposition Parties

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Summary

- This paper focuses on three parties of the Turkish opposition, CHP, İYİ and DEVA, in an attempt to counterbalance the almost exclusively Erdoğan-AKP-MHP-centered mainstream political analysis.
- The current authoritarian environment in Turkey is crucial in shaping the behaviour and strategies of the opposition, since it tests its ability to respond effectively to the growing societal demands and become agents of political change.
- CHP’s hybrid official stance and rhetoric along with its social interaction on the ground give the party a high momentum of change as it tries to reflect and express the social and political realities of present-day Turkey.
- The İYİ Party is emerging as a major factor of a potential transformation of nationalism moving from a traditional assertive narrative to a more pragmatic and inclusive one, while at the same time labouring to find new balances between traditional values and democracy.
- DEVA seems to reflect the dynamics evolving within a specific segment of Turkish society that is at ease with modernity and globalization and strives for Turkey’s harmonious co-existence with the rest of the world.
- The three parties tend to move from a concrete and strict interpretation of their ideological concepts to a more abstract and loose one, gradually becoming much more flexible and inclusive. This conversion reflects vividly the dynamics of their constant interplay with Turkish society.

Introduction

This paper focuses on three parties of the Turkish opposition, namely the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP*), the Good Party (*İYİ Parti*) and the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi, DEVA*, which means "cure" in Turkish) with respect to their declared ideology, their internal balances and their potential as political alternatives in the Turkish political scene. CHP was selected because it is the main political formation of the opposition, İYİ and DEVA because they show a consolidated upward tendency in recent polls. Ahmet Davutoğlu's Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*) doesn't seem to follow this dynamic¹ for the time being and the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP*) deserves a separate case study because of the intrinsic Kurdish dynamics.

"The culmination of the authoritarian posture on behalf of the government poses an imminent challenge to the opposition so as to respond effectively to the growing societal demands for a different course."

Despite its initial "conservative democrat" phase after the 2002 electoral victory, the ruling AKP and its head, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, moved towards a political approach defined by a heavily Islamist and nationalist agenda. This approach was further intensified after the challenges posed by the *Gezi* uprising in early summer 2013 and the open conflict with Fethullah Gülen that broke out later that year. The failed coup of July 2016 did nothing but exacerbate the regime's insecurity and feelings of threat, which in turn led to the intensification of its political authoritarianism.

This ongoing period in Turkish politics is marked by deep polarization, democratic deficit and a major setback to individual freedoms and human – especially women's – rights, with continuous verbal confrontations between the government and the opposition. Consequently, an attempt to further clarify the latter's position is important for counterbalancing the almost exclusively Erdoğan-AKP-MHP² centred political analysis. This neglect of the other Turkish parties' *milieu* leads to a flawed understanding of Turkish politics and consequently to a distorted picture of its internal dynamics. Even more so since the culmination of the authoritarian posture on behalf of the government poses an imminent challenge to the opposition so as to respond effectively *acta et verba* to the growing societal demands for a different course.

"The current authoritarian environment in Turkey is crucial in shaping the behaviour and strategies of the opposition and offers them the opportunity to grow and become agents of political change."

Our research is based on the assumption that the current authoritarian environment in Turkey, which dominates the political –and to a certain extent the social– dynamics in the country, is crucial in shaping the behaviour and strategies of the opposition. The potential and the dynamics of the latter are significant and can play a catalytic role for change in Turkey because "the political regime in Turkey is still competitive authoritarian" and "has not yet turned into full authoritarianism, as some scholars claim."³ This is a major factor that actually triggers deep ideological and pragmatic transformations within the opposition parties and offers them the opportunity to grow and become agents of political change.

Selçuk and Hekimci argue that "the rise of the democracy-authoritarianism cleavage explains the coordination of opposition parties from various ideological backgrounds" and that "the process of democratic backsliding gave rise to the democracy-authoritarianism cleavage, which gradually overshadowed the historically rooted secular-

¹ The only poll that shows *Gelecek* ahead of DEVA is the one conducted by *Avrasya Araştırma* between 26-31 March 2021. According to its results published on 3 April the former receives 3,1% and the latter 2,9%, cf. "Seçim anketi: MHP yüzde 7'nin altında, AK Parti yüzde 33.2", *Gazete Duvar* 3/4/2021, (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/secim-anketi-mhp-yuzde-7nin-altinda-ak-parti-yuzde-332-galeri-1518099>, accessed 3/4/2021).

² Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) that together with AKP formed the "People's Alliance" (*Cumhur İttifakı*).

³ Berk Esen and Sebnem Gümüüşçü (2019), "Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly: The 2019 Local Elections in Turkey", *South European Society and Politics*, 24:3, 317-342, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2019.1691318.

"Amidst the "competitive authoritarian" environment the "political coordination" of the Turkish opposition runs parallel and is intrinsic to deep social dynamics and transformations that frame the political and ideological sphere."

religious conservative and the Turkish-Kurdish social cleavages in the party-system". Moreover they draw attention to the fact that "the opposition parties framed their coordination over their fight for democracy and muted their programmatic differences about the role of Islam and how to address the Kurdish conflict. Because of their coordination, the opposition parties successfully undermined AKP's parliamentary majority in 2015 and 2018. In the 2019 local elections, opposition coordination led to power change in Istanbul, Ankara, and other key cities."⁴

This is exactly what happened when in 2018, CHP and İYİ Party led the Nation's Alliance (*Millet ittifakı*) composed of several centre/right-wing parties, such as the Islamist-oriented Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi, SP*) and the conservative right Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti, DP*). During the 2019 local elections the mainly Kurdish-oriented HDP's voters expressed their support for the opposition coalition's candidates, permitting them to win the mayoralty of many big cities (İstanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Mersin, Adana etc.). We argue that amidst this "competitive authoritarian" environment the "political coordination" of the Turkish opposition is not merely based on pragmatic political calculations generated by the rules of the current electoral system. It runs parallel and is intrinsic to deep social dynamics and transformations that frame the political and ideological sphere and offer new opportunities for ideological transitions to all parties and specifically to the parties of the opposition.

"Despite AKP and President Erdoğan's dominant religious rhetoric on political and social affairs Turkish society moves contrariwise. It develops a high potential towards essential secularization and modernization."

During our last extensive examination of the Turkish landscape we had verified the hypothesis that, despite AKP and President Erdoğan's dominant religious rhetoric on political and social affairs, Turkish society moves contrariwise. It is developing a high potential towards essential secularization and modernization by forming a multitude of alternative hybrid identities in order to define itself individually as well as collectively.⁵ This transitional phase is highlighted by an evident need for change, where both societal and political agents shouldn't be identified only with what they were yesterday but also with what they will be tomorrow.

We also observed a similar process for the Turkish political parties, stating that the transformation of both "Kemalism" and CHP "is in full process and accelerating during the last period", as was the case with other parties of the Turkish political spectrum as well.⁶ Subsequent developments verified that AKP, CHP and İYİ are indeed undergoing deep internal transformations, which often lead to grievances, disagreements and sometimes even to the exit of dissidents and the formation of new parties.

In order to highlight the ideological transformations that are taking place within the three selected parties of the current study and their potential to sustainably engage in transformative politics, we discerned certain *transition cleavages*. These depict the transition from a traditional ideological and political attitude towards a novel, hybrid one that tries to reflect the new social dynamics while accommodating each party's traditional matrix.

In order to describe these *cleavages* we have established a set of four *indicators* i.e. mainstream conceptual frames in present Turkish social and political reality, which reflect the process of party change:

⁴ Orçun Selçuk and Dilara Hekimci (2020), "The rise of the democracy-authoritarianism cleavage and opposition coordination in Turkey (2014–2019)", *Democratization*, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1803841.

⁵ George Angeletopoulos and Evangelos Areteos, *Turkey. The Train of Great Modernization* (in Greek), (Athens: Papadopoulos, 2019). See also, Volkan Ertit, *Endişeli Muhafazakârlar Çağı. Dinden Uzaklaşan Türkiye* (Istanbul: Orient Yayınları, 2015).

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 112-113.

"Certain transition cleavages depict the transition from a traditional ideological and political attitude towards a novel, hybrid one that tries to reflect the new social dynamics while accommodating each party's traditional matrix."

- Nationalism (nowadays the main political point of reference) and the Kurdish issue.
- Secularism.
- Individual freedoms and human rights.
- Turkish youth and especially the Turkish Generation Z.

The recent protest demonstrations by Boğaziçi students, the ongoing stigmatization of the LGBTI community and the public reaction against Erdoğan's decision to withdraw Turkey from the Istanbul Convention evidenced Turkish society's increasing sensitivity to issues pertaining to individual freedoms and human rights. This sensitivity is undoubtedly intertwined with the emergence of a different youth group, the "Generation Z". Its members don't seem to share the choices, apprehensions and social values of the older ones and tend to form their own new hybrid identities. Moreover, 75% of them appear totally unwilling to vote for the incumbent President and his coalition.⁷ According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, those born between 1997-2005 and with the right to vote in the upcoming 2023 elections number 13 million, constituting 20,3% of the electorate.⁸

Our findings along the above lines will attempt to show that CHP and İYİ are in full-fledged – yet fragile – momentum of inner change and have the potential to emerge as major factors of transformation of traditional ideologies and political narratives by becoming much more linked to Turkish society and its vibrant dynamics. DEVA on the other hand, despite its much more recent foundation and its limited appeal to the public, emerges as a party which reflects deeper changes in a significant segment of society and its political potential.

"A set of four indicators reflect the process of party change: 1) Nationalism (nowadays the main political point of reference) and the Kurdish issue, 2) Secularism, 3) Individual freedoms and human rights, 4) Turkish youth and especially the Turkish Generation Z."

CHP: Between the shadow of the past and the light of transformation?

*"One of our mistakes was that we turned the headscarf issue into Turkey's number one problem; what's it to you my friend? Our compatriots are unemployed, they want jobs. The farmers' situation is evident; we have other issues as well. There is poverty and destitution, there is anarchy. We forgot all of these and discussed whether women should wear the headscarf or not. And that was a mistake."*⁹

When [Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu](#), the leader of CHP, acknowledged this in 2017, the party had been in a momentum of change since his election as its President in 2010. This public "confession" was indicative of the depth of this effort of internal transformation, since the headscarf issue was one of the most thorny issues, which had divided Turkish society for decades.

⁷ "Gezici Araştırma Merkezi Başkanı Murat Gezici: Z kuşağının yüzde 75'i AKP'ye oy vermeyecek", *T24*, 26/3/2021 (<https://t24.com.tr/haber/gezici-arastirma-merkezi-baskani-murat-gezici-z-kusaginin-yuzde-75-i-akp-ye-oy-vermeyecek.941593/>, accessed 26/3/2021). Turkish pollster İbrahim Uslu verifies that Generation Z's members "don't feel close to any ideology or ideological group" and that 68,7% "do not define themselves in terms of Atatürkist, nationalist and conservative." He attests that they follow politics closely, adding that they focus more on issues such as the economy, rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights and liberties, education. He mentions that his own daughter, a member of this Generation, shows a close interest in Greek mythology rather than what Turkish politicians did some 20 years ago, cf. İpek Özbey, "Araştırmacı Uslu'ya göre seçimde farklı adaylar çıkma olasılığı yüksek", *Cumhuriyet*, 1/2/2021 (<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/arastirmaci-uslu-ya-gore-secimde-farkli-adaylar-cikma-olasiligi-yukse-1810401/>, accessed 1/2/2021).

⁸ Soner Çağaptay, "Generations in 2023 Elections, according to TurkStat", *Trendsmap* (3-3-2021) (<https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1367118214166155265>, accessed 27/3/2021); Seren Sevin Korkmaz, "Turkey's youth: Hope for re-democratization amid polarization", *Open Democracy*, 23/2/2021 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/turkeys-youth-hope-for-re-democratization-amid-polarization/>, accessed 24/2/2021).

⁹ Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan başörtüsü konusunda özelleştiri" *Haberler.com* (15-1-2020), (<https://www.haberler.com/kilicdaroglu-ndan-basortusu-konusunda-ozelestiri-12818841-haber/>, accessed 30-3-2021).

"Kılıçdaroğlu has certainly managed to instil a radically new spirit of renovation into its structures and to a large extent to its mentality."

The Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) was founded in 1923 and is the oldest, centennial in fact, political party of the Turkish Republic. In its program it refers to the "Six Arrows" – policy shortcuts introduced by its founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk– which represent the basic principles of "Kemalism": Republicanism, Nationalism, Statism, Populism, Laicism and Revolutionary Reformism.

Kılıçdaroğlu may not be considered very successful in bringing his party to power but he has certainly managed to instil a radically new spirit of renovation into its structures and, to a large extent, into its mentality. Being of Kurdish Alevi origin himself, he managed to overcome the subversive mobilization of the old guard and remain the party's leader despite its electoral shortcomings. Nevertheless, he took credit for the successful election of [Mansur Yavaş](#) and [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#) as mayors of Ankara and Istanbul respectively in 2019, after forming the Nation's Alliance in 2018.¹⁰

As stated, for a long period of time now the party seems to have been undergoing the pains of transformation. Recently, three CHP MPs (Mehmet Ali Çelebi, Hüseyin Avni Aksoy and Özcan Özel) have resigned, presumably to join the newly founded "Homeland Party" (*Memleket Partisi*) led by the CHP's former presidential candidate Muharrem İnce. Rationalizing their resignation, they blasted their former party for having abandoned "Atatürk's principles", describing themselves as infused by the "29 October spirit".¹¹ These resignations, the new rhetoric adopted publicly by a number of the party's youth organizations, along with radical postures such as the one put forth by Istanbul Provincial Representative Canan Kaftancıoğlu, are indicative of the intra-party agitation.

The transition cleavage for CHP is revolving about secularism, nationalism and the Kurdish issue. Traditionally CHP's expression of secularism was assertive and actually exclusive of people identifying more with the conservative dimensions of Islam, especially of women wearing the headscarf. Today, the party's dominant stance points towards a more inclusive expression of secularism where conservative Islam and its manifestations can be partially legitimized and find a place within CHP's view of Turkey.

"The transition cleavage for CHP is spotted along secularism, nationalism and the Kurdish issue."

Although the CHP is a member of the Socialist International and an associate member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), its traditional identity was identified with the all-powerful "Kemalist" state and its elites, with the major political expression of nationalism, as well as more with the employers and much less with the workers. However, since the election of Kılıçdaroğlu as the head of the party, CHP has started to explore different paths so as to connect with society and to represent different groups. Recently, while the official stance and behaviour of the party seems to follow the same pattern, there are significant undercurrents within it that signify a timid penchant towards a less assertive nationalism. The most evident field where this timid transition can be detected is the Kurdish issue, where CHP has started not only to espouse an inclusive stance towards HDP but also to attract Kurdish votes.¹²

According to the political analyst Can Beysanoğlu,¹³ there are three distinct sub-groups within the CHP. The first one encompasses bureaucrats and intellectuals loyal to

¹⁰ The continuing potential of these two politicians in the likelihood of a presidential candidacy is clearly indicated by a recent poll by *Anar*, in which Yavaş receives 47,5% against Erdoğan's 37% and İmamoğlu receives 45,3% against the incumbent President's 37,3%, cf. "Son anket geldi: Yavaş ve İmamoğlu, Erdoğan'ı geçiyor", *Cumhuriyet*, 7/3/2021 (<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/son-anket-geldi-erdogani-geciyorlar-1818848>, accessed 7/3/2021).

¹¹ Anniversary of the proclamation of the Turkish Republic by Atatürk.

¹² Vecdi Erbay, "Turkish main opposition 'wants to make peace with the Kurds'", *Duvar English*, 15/3/2021 (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-main-opposition-wants-to-make-peace-with-the-kurds-news-56632>, accessed 15/3/2021).

¹³ Can Beysanoğlu, "Kemalizm ve CHP'nin iç Yapısı", 28/8/2020 (<https://www.perspektif.online/kemalizm-ve-chpnin-ic-yapisi/>, accessed 22/2/2021).

"During the last period there are significant party undercurrents that signify a timid penchant towards a less assertive nationalism, which can be evidently detected in the Kurdish issue."

Atatürk's principles, who had always assigned themselves to the historical "mission" of formulating CHP's official ideology. The second group is the largest one, comprised of introverted and basically "apolitical" supporters, prone to adopting whatever variation of the party's ideological proclamations are in vogue each season. Their willing differentiation is based on entirely "cultural" traits, namely their distinct secular way of life and its respective values. The third group consists of the Alevis and of those originating from Balkan and Circassian refugees. Having departed from "right-wing" political affiliations – namely Islamist-conservative – which traditionally tended to marginalize them, they have embraced wholeheartedly the Kemalist-nationalist modernization of the Turkish society "from above". Beysanoğlu suggests that the second and the third groups are "competing with each other", especially since Kılıçdaroğlu's "broad front" policy allows for new approaches to the "new middle classes acquainted with the social media" on the one hand and a radicalization of the members of the third group on the other. The latter are said to have the upper hand in the party's youth branches and to be "nostalgic of the 1970s and leaning towards a peculiar leftist approach".¹⁴

"The most influential group within CHP are now the socio-democrats (sol kanat), while the nationalists (ulusalcılar) are significantly weaker."

Beysanoğlu's analysis is to a large extent verified by our research, which confirms that the most influential group within the CHP is now the socio-democrats (*sol kanat*), while the nationalists (*ulusalcılar*) are significantly weaker. This is the result of Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership, which managed to weaken the latter, who had acquired a lot of weight during Baykal's time. Nationalists still have some power in the party organs and the ability to raise issues but now they act more on an individual level and no longer constitute a powerful group within the party. İnce left the party precisely because he realized that he could not take over since the *ulusalcılar* had ceased to be powerful.

"The current dynamic pushes the party towards the left but it still needs time to mature. CHP's political identity is under constant pressure to change and to reflect more the complexity of today's Turkish society."

The current dynamic is pushing the party towards the left but it still needs time to mature. CHP's political identity is under constant pressure to change and to reflect more the complexity of today's Turkish society while trying to express it politically. Alevis are very present within CHP's structure and in the grass roots but they do not constitute a compact distinct identity group. Sunni Kurds are also present, but not as much as the Alevis. Kılıçdaroğlu is making serious efforts to transform CHP in line with a more liberal identity. The mainstream current in the party asserts its pro EU attitude and its followers act as such, since they are fully aware of the fact that, when in power, there is no way to achieve full modernization other than the EU. Persisting statist rhetoric by certain dignitaries does exist, but "CHP will be more pragmatic than that".

Still, there are some reflexes that are hard to get rid of, mainly when it comes to the perception of the state and the Kurdish issue. Regarding the latter, CHP has difficulties in adapting to the minimum expectations of the Kurds, e.g. the language issue. Nevertheless, for the first time the party considers the Kurds and HDP to be their strategic allies.¹⁵ The CHP will try to settle the Kurdish issue through trust-building and through economic development in the southeast. What is new is that CHP is leaving behind its traditional suspicion and negativity towards the Kurds. Under Kılıçdaroğlu it has actually become the main opposition party that supports the Kurds and tries to keep the HDP in the orbit of the *Millet İttifakı*, as well as to keep the balances between İYİ and HDP.

¹⁴ For a leftist social democrat initiative within the party's youth branch, see Alper Budka, "'Demokratik sosyalist' CHP'li gençler harekete geçiyor", *GazeteDuvar*, 4/12/2020 (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/demokratik-sosyalist-chpli-gencler-harekete-geciyor-haber-1506321>, accessed 4/12/2020).

¹⁵ The future of HDP will be crucial for this alliance since if the party is eventually banned, the new dynamics amongst the Kurdish politicians and voters could change.

"CHP has difficulties to adapt to the minimum expectations of the Kurds, but for the first time the party considers them and HDP to be their strategic allies."

CHP's greatest Gordian knot is its own history, "the shadow of all the mistakes it has made", eloquently put by one of our interviewees. He added that "CHP's history is its shadow but also it is its light because it is the founding party of the Republic". Today, the CHP is trying to detach itself from that "shadow" and to present a convincing and "enlightened" image, different from the traditional one of an elite hardcore secular party.

According to the same sources, the backbone (*anadamar*) of the party today is more social democrat and centre oriented, with persons like Eren Erdem, İlhan Cihaner, Selin Sayek Böke etc. playing a catalytic role for the openings to the Kurds and the overall turn towards the left. The same sources suggest that the last "big mistake" of the party was in 2018 when it acquiesced to the lifting of the parliamentary immunities of HDP's leading cadres. Such "mistakes", they say, are "a luxury CHP can no longer afford since their repetition will push the Kurds permanently away". Hence, this is deemed "a very delicate period" for the party.¹⁶

"CHP's the biggest Gordian knot is its own history. The party is trying to detach itself from the "shadows" of the past and to present a convincing "enlightened" image."

In the southeast, CHP is faring better recently. While in the last general elections of 2018 CHP received 2,7%, the latest poll put the party at 7,4%.¹⁷ CHP focuses on problems of daily life and tries to show a very human face to the population. Kurds are still hesitant and reluctant to trust CHP. Nevertheless, there is a certain change in the atmosphere and a dynamic that could bring more Kurdish votes to the party. Kurdish youth is also changing its views about CHP since the party is not considered as much of a hard-liner as before. Still, time will show if the party proves able to overcome its heavy past in the southeast.

The party's journey through transformation seems sinuous and at times unstable, since Kılıçdaroğlu and the like-minded are walking on thin ice. They tend to adopt a more pragmatic and rational nationalism, which has Atatürk and not Ziya Gökalp at its core. Emphasis is given to the equal distribution of revenues along with an attempt to manage people's real, everyday problems, as well as to defend individual and women's rights.¹⁸

"Kurds are still hesitant and reluctant to trust CHP. Nevertheless, Kurdish youth is changing its views about CHP and the party is not considered as much a hard-liner as before."

Despite grievances and dissatisfaction that occasionally lead CHP's highly secular and nationalist voters to İYİ, the party is managing to keep its overall grassroots and to maintain its electoral percentages. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem to get more votes. This is mainly due to the fact that CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu are not assertive enough in their dynamic of change and that CHP needs to move increasingly out of its comfort zone, something that, admittedly, is not very easy. For example, there was a lot of resistance from the *ulusalcılar* who were not happy with the leadership's "New CHP" (*yeni CHP*) approach and wanted a "CHP anew" (*yeniden CHP*) one, but eventually they were not able to impose it. The same sources stress that the dominant internal current flows along a social democratic riverbed, much more pragmatic and closer to society's needs and realities. According to them, CHP is trying to implement a deep re-positioning (*yeni rota*), just like the "New Labour" shift in the UK. In this respect, it is worth mentioning Kılıçdaroğlu's open differentiation from the mainstream view that "LGBTI damages the

¹⁶ See also, "Turkish opposition, leading MEPs condemn expulsion of HDP MP Gergerlioğlu from parliament", *Duvar English*, 17/3/2021 (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-opposition-leading-meps-condemn-expulsion-of-hdp-mp-gergerlioglu-from-parliament-news-56679>, accessed 18/3/2021).

¹⁷ <https://rawest.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Rawest-Bolgesel-Siyasi-Egitimler-Arastirmasi-Ocak21.pdf>

¹⁸ In an inclusive interview in early March Kılıçdaroğlu blasted the "People's Alliance" for their political intention to "punish the Kurds" by prohibiting HDP, regretted their decision to withdraw Turkey from the Istanbul Convention, demanded the immediate release of both Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala and added a witty remark that "humourless people don't stand a chance of running the state", cf. "Kılıçdaroğlu: İktidar kendisine oy vermeyen bütün Kürtleri cezalandırmak istiyor", *Gazete Duvar*, 6/3/2021 (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/kilicdaroglu-iktidar-kendisine-oy-vermeyen-butun-kurtleri-cezalandirmak-istiyor-haber-1515327>, accessed 6/3/2021).

"The dominant internal current flows along a social democratic riverbed, much more pragmatic and closer to society's needs and realities. CHP is trying to implement a deep re-positioning (yeni rota)."

family structure", when during a recent televised interview he stressed that such judgments are "totally irrelevant. Why should LGBTI harm the family structure?".¹⁹

In view of the aforementioned, it is observed - both from the hybrid official stance and rhetoric of the party and its social interaction on the ground - that CHP has a high momentum of change and that the party is dynamically trying to reflect and express the social and political realities of today's Turkey.

İYİ Parti: Nationalism under renovation?

In early March, Meral Akşener visited small shop owners in the market of Sincan, Ankara. The cultural scenery prepared for her visit bore a heavily Turkish/neo-Ottoman imprint, with the parade of people dressed like Ottoman soldiers marching militarily under the sounds of *mehter* (Ottoman military band). Akşener passed through a corridor of party members holding flags of various Turkic republics and people.

Sociologically, Sincan is a conservative, lower middle class area. Concomitantly, all the symbolisms and the semantics of the event were very Turkish-centred. One of our interviewees argued that this kind of event was exceptional and actually expressed their surprise that all the Ottoman paraphernalia was there, arguing that it was the local party organization that staged the whole event.

Within and parallel to these dominant cultural connotations, Akşener's presence fitted perfectly into the environment and, at the same time, she seemed to bring something different, something beyond this cultural frame. While she entered, a heavy male voice shouted from the microphone "*Anadolu kadını geliyor*" (Here comes the Anatolian woman), as İYİ derives its legitimacy from and has its cultural roots in Turkish Anatolia. What is interesting is that in the party they call her "abla" (a traditional term for the "elder sister") and – contrary to the Western perception – they don't like to call her "asena" (she-wolf). Akşener appeared capable of showing a lot of empathy, giving indeed the feeling of an "abla". While conversing with the shop owners, she exhibited excellent communication skills, adapting to every interlocutor.

İYİ Party was established on 25 October 2017 by former members of the ultra-nationalist MHP Meral Akşener, [Ümit Özdağ](#) and [Koray Aydın](#), after repeated and unsuccessful attempts to unseat the party's president [Devlet Bahçeli](#). They were immediately joined by dissidents of the main opposition party, CHP, such as the co-founder [Aytun Çıray](#) and politicians from the social democrat DSP and the centre-right Democrat Party.

Following the initial five MPs' parliamentary representation, 15 MPs from CHP joined İYİ in the run-up to the 2018 general elections, offering it the additional opportunity to present its own presidential candidate, Meral Akşener. This co-operation was the beginning of "a beautiful [political] friendship" which paved the way for the establishment of the aforementioned Nation's Alliance. In the 2018 elections, İYİ received 9,96% of the votes, which won it 43 seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, although Akşener didn't fare so well as presidential nominee, receiving only 7,29%. In the 2019 municipal elections the party took the credit from its support for the common mayors elected in big cities like Istanbul and Ankara.

¹⁹ "Kılıçdaroğlu LGBT'yi savundu: Türk aile yapısını bozmaz", *Yeni Şafak* 10/4/2021 (<https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/kilicdaroglu-lgbt-yi-savundu-turk-aile-yapisini-bozmaz-3617786>, accessed 10/4/2021)

"The declared aim of the newly found party is to fill the political vacuum between AKP and CHP, addressing mainly the issues of democratic deficit, social injustice and state modernization."

The declared aim of the newly founded party is to fill the political vacuum between AKP and CHP, addressing mainly the issues of democratic deficit, social injustice and state modernization. Its political identity is solidly based on a strong nationalist, Kemalist and secular bedrock, which it attempts to enrich with more modern and centrist political rhetoric. The robust nationalist vein is mirrored in the party's emblem which offers a strong connotation of the medieval Turkic "Kayı" tribe and in the light blue colour of its flag, which refers the voter to the Seljuk blue of the homonymous Anatolian dynasty. Nevertheless, in a parallel and striking symbolism the new party's announcement took place at the Nazım Hikmet Cultural Center in Ankara, signalling its attempt to adopt an all-encompassing political identity. Akşener was unanimously elected as its first leader with no other candidacy put forth.

"One of İYİ's main political aims is to restore the parliamentary system in an "enhanced" form. It emphasizes economic development, combating illiteracy, pursuing the restoration of the judicial system's repute and addressing income inequality."

One of İYİ's main political aims is to restore the parliamentary system in an "enhanced" form. Thus, it strongly opposes the centripetal presidential one introduced after the 2017 constitutional referendum, as well as its main exponent President Erdoğan. It places itself at the centre of the political spectrum, stands against what it depicts as ineffectiveness and polarization and is self-portrayed as a "democratic progressive party paying attention to traditional values". It emphasizes economic development, combating illiteracy, pursuing the restoration of the judicial system's repute and addressing income inequality. At the same time the party appears pro-European in terms of values and policy orientation. According to its program it favours a positive agenda in Turkey's relations with the [European Union](#), a stance echoed in several public declarations made by its representatives. Nevertheless, the party's program highlights that "the current full membership procedure does not serve mutual interests", adding in a rather vague fashion that İYİ "will proceed with ground preparations for a sound relationship, which will reflect bilateral interests in [Turkey's] relations with the EU".²⁰ When it comes to NATO, the program is more clear-cut, pledging to "continue Turkey's cooperation under NATO's umbrella according to the requirements of its national interests and security", since this membership "is not contradictory with the application of national policies and strategies".²¹

"For İYİ nationalism constitutes the field of the main transitional cleavage. The ideological reference of its version of nationalism is not only Ziya Gökalp but Ernest Renan."

For İYİ nationalism constitutes the field of the main *transitional cleavage* – since the party could be considered as a splinter from MHP – and its leadership aspires to shape the concept in a more inclusive form. The latter has three pillars: democracy, nationalism and sustainable economic development. As explained, nationalism is in direct reference to Atatürk (*Atatürk milliyetçiliği*), a notion which suggests that the origins, ethnic or religious, of people are not important; what matters is their behaviour. As long as one behaves as a "citizen of the country" he/she is "one of us". The ideological reference of İYİ's version of nationalism is not only Ziya Gökalp (the party resents its "racist" dimension) but Ernest Renan.²² It also points out that, whereas German thinkers like Fichte had defined the nation according to objective criteria such as race or an ethnic group's "sharing of common characteristics" (language, etc.), Renan defined it according to the desire of a people to live together. He summarized this idea in his famous phrase, "*avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore*" (having done great things together and wishing to do more).

Accordingly, during a party congress Akşener had waved her ID card saying that it was the "title deed of the Turkish Republic" (*TC tapusu budur*), meaning that citizenship is the

²⁰ İYİ Parti Programı, p. 73 (https://iyiparti.org.tr/Assets/pdf/iyi_parti_programi.pdf).

²¹ Ibid., p. 76.

²² Saygı Öztürk, "Beyefendi babasının evi gibi ülke yönetiyor" (24/2/2018) (<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/beyefendi-babasinin-evi-gibi-ulke-yonetiyo-2244192/>, accessed 20/2/2021).

link between people and the nation.²³ The party's ideological approach to nationalism is that "we don't transform it; we take it back to its origins which are Atatürk and citizenship".

"The difference between MHP and İYİ's approach to nationalism is that the former espouses a concrete/objective interpretation (somut), whereas the latter opts for an abstract/subjective one (soyut)."

What is interesting, though, in terms of the concept's actual transformation is the explanation advanced about the difference between MHP and İYİ's approach to nationalism: the former espouses a concrete/objective interpretation (*somut*), whereas the latter opts for an abstract/subjective one (*soyut*). In this sense, İYİ tries to go forward to a new form of nationalism while MHP goes backwards to its emotional "idealistically nationalist" (*ülkücü*) roots. The fact is indicative of a more modernist approach to Turkish nationalism adopted by İYİ in which its "abstract" form allows for an individualistic interpretation of the notion. This important distinction opens the door for the party to become a quasi-laboratory for the concept's transformation. It actually tries to advocate a more moderate form of nationalism that has the dynamic to become more inclusive and thus more politically pragmatic.

This ideological differentiation between İYİ and MHP is perhaps a reflection of a very significant class differentiation between the two parties: İYİ's supporters are more middle class, urban, educated, with an aptitude towards a more rational nationalism, while MHP's supporters are closer to emotional nationalism, less urban, more lower class and less educated.²⁴ İYİ is staunchly secular (whereas MHP has a very deep Islamic dimension) and an exponent of liberal economy and "patriotism". According to the same sources, religion should be a personal belief, restricted to the private sphere, while now it has become a state issue. On the other hand, a recent research conducted by *Aksoy Araştırma* shows a remarkable overlapping between the daily agenda issues deemed salient both by Generation Z and by İYİ's voters. Thus, 57% of the latter consider the "improvement of the economy" to be the top priority, followed by preferences such as "expensive cost of life", "unemployment" (50,3%) and the "empowerment of democracy".²⁵

"A recent research shows a remarkable overlapping between the daily agenda issues deemed salient both by Generation Z and by İYİ's voters."

Moreover, İYİ has espoused a very careful stance concerning the lifting of the parliamentary immunities of HDP MPs. Its main argument is that these MPs are accused of events that happened before they were elected and this means that either the state did not do its job properly when screening them before becoming candidates or that there is actually another motivation behind their prosecution.²⁶ Although Akşener avoided taking a clear public stance on the issue, Aytun Çıray's statement against the lifting of HDP MP Gergerlioğlu's immunity is consistent with the party's declared attitude.²⁷

The Kurdish issue is still a difficult equation for İYİ. In the party program Kurds are only referred to as "the people of the area" (*bölge halkı*) - the latter being south-eastern Turkey - and their problems are addressed only through the "developmental" prism.²⁸ İYİ

²³ Meral Akşener Seçim Kampanyası Başlangıç Toplantısında Konuştu – İyi Parti, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfqYszJnqw>, starting from 11:10, accessed 15 March 2021).

²⁴ Ayşe Çavdar, "Meral Hanım'ın yolculuğu", *Gazeteduvar*, 1/3/2021 (<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/meral-hanimin-yolculugu-makale-1514722>, accessed 2/3/2021).

²⁵ Aksoy Araştırma, "Türkiye Monitörü Ocak Sayısı".

²⁶ Selda Güneysu, "İYİ Parti önce içeriğe bakacak", *Cumhuriyet*, 1/3/2021 (<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/iyi-parti-once-icerige-bakacak-1817197>, access 1/3/2021).

²⁷ "İYİ Partili Çıray: Gergerlioğlu'nun vekilliğinin düşürülmesine karşıyız", *Yeni Şafak*, 19/3/2021 (<https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/iyi-partili-ciray-gergerlioglunun-vekilliginin-dusurulmesine-karsiyiz-3614437>, accessed 25/3/2021). It is important to note that Çıray is appointed as of 7/2/2021 "principal advisor" to the party's leader M. Akşener, ending thus a period of dispute among them, cf. İsmail Saymaz-Veli Toprak, "Aytun Çıray Akşener'in başdanışmanı oldu", *Sözcü*, 7/2/2021 (<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/aytun-ciray-aksenerin-basdanismani-oldu-6248405/>, access 18/2/2021).

²⁸ İYİ Parti Programı, p. 39.

"İYİ has espoused a very careful stance concerning the lifting of the parliamentary immunities of HDP MPs. Nevertheless, the Kurdish issue appears for now to be Akşener's and İYİ's political Gordian knot."

is practically not in favour of including the Kurdish language in the educational system, while the language issue is a crucial indicator of the party's intentions towards the Kurds, since this is their minimum request and expectation. The Kurdish issue appears, for now, to be Akşener's and İYİ's political Gordian knot. Nevertheless, the party has the potential to play a constructive role within a coalition, something that could at least change the atmosphere, but İYİ and its leader will have to make big steps forward with respect to the Kurdish voters.

Commenting on individual freedoms and human rights, the party stressed that it has no problem with the headscarf and will not change anything about the current status in this respect. As with CHP, İYİ too has accepted this "new normality" in Turkey and they do not intend to bring back a debate on the headscarf issue, an attitude which permits them to attract voters from the conservative Muslims.²⁹ At the same time though, the party considers religious (*imam hatip*) schools to be too numerous, since "Turkey does not need all these imams". On the other hand, Akşener stated publicly that, although as a mother she wouldn't like her child or grandchild to have LGBTI orientations, she is against any kind of violence and discrimination against LGBTI individuals and she fervently defended the Istanbul Convention.³⁰

Given the above, İYİ Party is emerging as a major factor of a potential transformation of nationalism moving from a traditional assertive narrative to a more pragmatic and inclusive one, while at the same time labouring to find new balances between traditional values and democracy.

DEVA: A post-Islamism and post-Kemalism endeavour?

While in CHP's program there are thirty one references to "Atatürk" and in İYİ's nine, in DEVA's program "Atatürk" is mentioned only once; moreover, this is found in the section describing the party's foreign policy and diplomacy. This single reference combined with the absence of any equivalent reference to Islam is a reflection of the dynamics of change within the particular segment of Turkish society to which DEVA hopes to appeal.

"DEVA is a centre-right party. Although it is considered to be a splinter from AKP, only 19 out of its 88 founding members had direct connection with AKP."

DEVA is a centre-right party founded in March 2020 under the leadership of the former Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the Economy, Ali Babacan. The latter has close ties with former President Abdullah Gül, who has kept distance from Erdogan for about a decade. The party is officially represented by one MP in the Turkish Parliament (the co-founder of DEVA, Mustafa Yeneroğlu, who became independent after resigning from AKP with which he had been elected). In the most recent polls, support for the party varies between 2 and 3,5%.³¹

Interestingly enough, although DEVA is considered to be a splinter from AKP, only 19 out of its 88 founding members had a direct connection with the AKP (amongst them an ex Minister of Justice, an ex-Minister of Science, Industry and Technology and an ex State Minister). There are two founding members who had a direct connection with the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*-SP), one with the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket*

²⁹ "İYİ Party receives votes from 5.2 percent of the religious segment, 7.6 percent of conservatives, 15.2 percent of nationalists/ultranationalists, 18 percent of seculars/laics, 13.1 percent of Kemalists, 10.7 percent of liberal/democrats, 4.9 percent of social democrats, and 5.8 percent of socialist/communists", Ayşe Çavdar, "The journey of Turkey's right wing female leader, Meral Akşener", *Gazete Duvar*, 4/3/2021 (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/the-journey-of-turkeys-right-wing-female-leader-meral-aksener-article-56495>, accessed 6/3/2021).

³⁰ "Akşener'e sorduk: Çocuğunuz LGBTİ olsa?" Interview with Nevşin Mengü on *Sözcü TV*, 3/7/2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGR8KnxqKZE>, after 18:30, accessed 15/3/2021).

³¹ "Son anket: MHP baraj altı, AKP'nin oy oranında büyük düşüş", *Cumhuriyet*, (11-3-2021) (<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/son-anket-mhp-baraj-alti-akpnin-oy-oranin-buyuk-dusus-1819974>, accessed 11-3-2021).

"The official party program highlights the Kurdish issue as one of rule of law and human rights, espousing thus a clear position concerning its nature as well as the ways to manage it."

Partisi-MHP) and one with the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP). All the other founding members have no direct connections with any party whatsoever.

A closer sociological look at the founding members reveals that their profiles vary extensively and include former high ranking civil servants, lawyers, civil engineers, businessmen and businesswomen, teachers, academics, housewives, university students, a retired general, a Jazz player and a Japanese-speaking businesswoman. Moreover, 61 out of the 88 are men while the average age of the party's founders is 47 years.³²

A survey conducted by the party amongst its 18.000 volunteers showed that before joining 30% of them had voted for AKP, 20% for CHP, 20% for MHP and 20% had not voted at all. These findings add to the idea that the party is not merely a splinter from AKP and that its grassroots include people from almost all parties of the political spectrum.

The official party program highlights the Kurdish issue as one of rule of law and human rights, espousing thus a clear position concerning its nature as well as the ways to manage it.³³ In that sense, it is significant that DEVA is faring quite well in the southeast where, according to a recent poll, the party receives 5% of the votes while, according to the above sources, DEVA has the potential to attract conservative Muslims from the region.

"One of its main pillars is described as "pro-EU, pro-Kurdish solution rational patriotism" - in contradiction to the dominant spirit of "emotional nationalism"."

The party's positions, as well as Babacan's views concerning individual freedoms and styles of life, have been repeatedly expressed within a liberal framework, while the party is overly in favour of the return to a parliamentary system.

DEVA's main positions pertain to the separation of powers and the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, participatory and pluralist democracy. The party program stipulates that the guarantee of fundamental human rights and freedoms should be in accord with international conventions and universal values.

DEVA is described as a "mainstream party" and not a "centre right" one. They argue that one of its main pillars is described as "pro-EU, pro-Kurdish solution rational patriotism" – in contradiction to the dominant spirit of "emotional nationalism" – that has no need of enemies and that mainly aims to improve the country's situation. However, despite the fact that Babacan and DEVA are significantly vocal on all public agenda issues, the party still lacks visibility in the mainstream media and needs a more consistent effort to persuade the wider public that "Turkey's great new hope" is not "the same old news"³⁴

"Notwithstanding DEVA's walking on a razor's edge between "old" and "new", the party is emerging rather as a post-Islamist and post-Kemalist party."

Notwithstanding DEVA's walking on a razor's edge between "old" and "new", the party seems to be emerging as a post-Islamist and post-Kemalist party. This is due to the fact that its positions and program derive their legitimacy, not from conservative Islamism or nationalist Kemalism, but from a world view based on universal values and local modernization. Henceforth, DEVA seems to reflect the dynamics evolving within a specific segment of Turkish society that is at ease with modernity and globalization and strives for Turkey's harmonious co-existence with the rest of the world.

³² <https://devapartisi.org/teskilat/kurucu-uyeler>

³³ <https://cdn.devapartisi.org/14/DEVA-PARTISI-PROGRAMI2.pdf>

³⁴ Selim Sazak, "Turkey's Great New Hope Is the Same Old News", *Foreign Policy*, 25 June 2020; (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/25/ali-babacan-erdogan-deva-turkeys-great-new-hope-is-the-same-old-news/>, accessed 30-6-2020).

Conclusion: The "Argonauts" of modern Turkey

"Recent polls measuring the "negative partisanship" demonstrate that the opposition parties have indeed a strong potential to attract support from a wider spectrum of the electoral basis."

The close examination of the three Turkish opposition parties, CHP, İYİ and DEVA provided us with valuable insight of their ongoing process of transformation. We established that these parties, acting in an environment of deep polarization and competitive authoritarianism, are undergoing a re-evaluation of their traditional core political ideas and beliefs, in an attempt to efficiently engage in constructive dialogue with a changing society and to address its needs and demands.

Recent polls measuring the "negative partisanship"— meaning the percentage of voters that would not vote for a party – demonstrate that the opposition parties do have a strong potential to attract support from a wider spectrum of the electoral basis. Thus, the parties with the lowest negative partisanship are DEVA with 0,3% and İYİ with 0,9%, while CHP's respective vote is at 12,8%. AKP's negative vote is the highest one, at 26,4%, followed by HDP with 26%, while MHP is much lower with 3,3%.³⁵

Evidently, this transformation process is not an easy one; it involves leaps forward as well as fallbacks and the great pains it entails often lead the three parties to give the impression of walking on thin ice.

"The three parties tend to move from a concrete and strict interpretation of their ideological concepts to a more abstract and loose one. This conversion reflects vividly the dynamics of their constant interplay with Turkish society."

In view of our four indicators, nationalism along with the Kurdish issue pose the major challenges for CHP. Equally, for İYİ the major challenge is the Kurdish issue followed by its attempt to redefine nationalism, whereas secularism and nationalism test DEVA's will to form a post-Islamist and post-Kemalist identity. Next to these, the perception of the state as a quasi-"sacred" entity remains a central common denominator for them and represents an additional major challenge for deeper change.

Attempting to define the parameters of their re-evaluation procedure, we observed that the three parties tend to move from a concrete and strict interpretation of the concepts described by our indicators to a more abstract and loose one. This approach leads them to convert their original and once firm ideological tenets and references into shells in a process of emptying, while their essential ideological and political content is gradually becoming much more flexible and inclusive. This conversion reflects vividly the dynamics of their constant interplay with the Turkish society, which shapes their attempt to gain the latter's political approval.

In fact, CHP, İYİ and DEVA are on a political and ideological journey that greatly resembles that of the *Argonauts* on their ship *Argo*. They are reminiscent of "the *Argonauts* renewing their ship during its voyage without changing its name"; in the end, although the name remains the same, the *Argo's* parts have been totally replaced.³⁶

³⁵ "Anket: Seçmenin 'asla oy vermem' dediği partiler hangileri?" T24, (13-3-2021)(<https://t24.com.tr/haber/anket-secmenin-asla-oy-vermem-dedigi-partiler-hangileri,938899>, accessed 13-3-2021).

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (London: Vintage Classics, 2020).