Turkish elections from Athens: How do foreign voters see the campaign?

Dr. Eylem Yanardagoglu,

Panteion University, Department of Communication, Media and Culture Visiting Scholar

ELIAMEP Turkey Program, Research Fellow

@eylemyanardag

Analysts in Turkey say that we are experiencing an election process that is very open to surprises, that the presidential candidates go head-to-head and a clear picture has not yet emerged regarding the distribution of undecided voters. It seems difficult to come up with a clear picture until the last moment, as there will be a few more large rallies and opinion polls before the elections. Meanwhile, voting for a substantial number of registered voters abroad started on Saturday, April 28. Foreign voters, whose number exceeds 3 million, will be able to vote until the end of May 9 at the overseas representations in 73 countries. There are 11,714 registered voters across Greece.

I am based at Panteion University as a visiting scholar since last September, conducting a study on digital citizenship and social media usage practices of Turkish-speaking immigrants living in Athens. I am also among the researchers in the Türkiye program of ELIAMEP. As the conversation progressed with the participants I met recently for my project, we talked about how they saw the elections, the communication campaigns and what kind of Turkey they would like to see after the elections.

The outlook from Athens is a little worrisome. While some of the Turkish citizens who have migrated to Athens from Turkey at different times are concerned about the security of the elections, some of them desire a pluralistic assembly with deputies that are more diverse in terms of the political spectrum after the election and with whom they will feel closer in terms of worldview. Women are very uncomfortable with the rowdy rhetoric that has spread to politics, the marginalization of minorities and different views, and they believe that this should change first. In addition, there is little hope for a more positive change in the status quo around Turkey-Greece Relations.

**Maria (50 years old, sales executive in a private company)**

I have been living in Athens for more than 30 years, I did not vote in every election, but I when I felt like some things should change, I voted in the last general elections. Now I want to vote again because I think that this bullying rhetoric needs to change. As far as I can see from afar, the difference between the educated and uneducated people in Turkey has increased a lot compared to the 1990s. I would like Turkey to be more modern, it is first and foremost for me that everyone has the freedom to express their opinion and not be prosecuted for this. People shouldn't feel guilty for what they think. As for Turkey-Greece relations, I think that regardless of which government comes, some standard policies will continue, maybe in a slightly different style. The current rhetoric in the recent years turned into something very rowdy and undiplomatic. But I think that nothing will change in Turkey-Greece relations in general. If they leave the people alone, there will be no problem for the people, but it seems as if the politicians are feeding off this unsolvable situation.

**Defne, 49 years old, yoga teacher**

I have been living here for 7 years, I go to Turkey almost every two months. There was a time when I did not vote as a political stance, but when the polarization increased in Turkey, I started using it. We have been eagerly awaiting a political change in Turkey in every election since 2015. Finally, the 2019 municipal elections turned out to be an extraordinary result, but I am worried because I was very confident in 2015, but things did not change. Politics in Turkey has moved in a direction similar to what we have seen in other countries such as Brazil and India in recent years, I call it the Trump effect. It is as if the necessity for politicians to be virtuous has disappeared. Along with Trump, there were a number of leaders such as Erdogan, Netanyahu, the prime minister of India who followed it, realizing that the bullying attitude was loved by some voters. Greek and European politics are not in that trend, here being ethical is still important, being virtuous is a value. Maybe nothing changes in practice, but at least the political discourse is different.

I don't follow the election campaign, but the news somehow leaks out from social media. I sympathize with the TIP, (Turkish Workers Party ) but according to the arithmetic of foreign votes, we should really vote for the strongest opposition party, not the party we actually prefer. Essentially, we're appointing a new CEO for a collapsing company, they're going to make a new board. I do not believe that any government can do anything independent of the deep state. Let's say the coalition won, in which direction can Türkiye go next? I don't think it's going anywhere. Maybe it could have a slightly more dignified rhetoric. If the opposition re-signs the Istanbul Convention \* when it comes to power, and if they release names like Osman Kavala, who are unjustly imprisoned, I would worship them even for this. The only thing that will change in relations with Greece will be the language, that rowdy language will go and a more honorable language will be used, but I do not expect more democratization.

**Murat (28 years old, works in marketing in a private company)**

As soon as I graduated from university, I found a job and settled in Athens. Let's say that the government and parliament changed after the election, it is still very difficult for me to go back. I personally would not want to be in government in Turkey, there is a huge wreckage, I hope not, but it seems to me that it will take a long time to recover. As an overseas voter, I will vote here. I went to Turkey recently, people are in Istanbul like crazy, everyone is so tense, why do people want to live in such a tense environment? Because people can't take bread home, they are frustrated This reflected in the society, it will also be reflected in this election. I am not very hopeful that the opposition will win. I follow the campaign on social media, the tweets that Selahattin Demirtaş sends from prison are very much viewed, and the interactions of Kılıçdaroğlu's “Alevi” and “Kurdish” videos are good. But why did they not find a candidate who is more active, younger than the 75-year-old ? After the elections, I would like to see more diversity from the parliament, more representation of parties such as the TIP (Workers' Party of Turkey) and the Memleket (Hometown) Party. In terms of Turkey-Greece relations, I would like to live in a period where we can live very fraternally, that it is possible for Turks to go to the islands without a visa, and it is very easy for those in Greece to go on holiday to Turkey. Showing Turkey or Greece as an enemy somehow helps politicians, but being very close will also helps.

**Giorgos, 60 years old, self-employed in own company**

After graduating from high school, I settled in Athens, I last voted in the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, and I will vote in this election as well. At the moment, I don't follow the election campaigns of politicians very closely, but I have a general idea from what I see from the media. I am worried that the elections will not proceed normally because I do not believe that the current government will go from power through the elections. Hopefully I'm wrong. When Erdogan first came, his face was more towards Europe, but for the last ten years there is democratic backsliding. Of course, Türkiye should turn its face to the west again.

I think that the decline in democracy started before the Gezi protests, it accelerated after the coup in 2016, a rapprochement with Russia began. The fear of the enemy is big, the armament has also increased. In recent years, methods such as intimidation, suppression, etc., which were used against minorities in the past, have started to apply to their own people, too. People have fled abroad, and they continue to flee. But on the other hand, the Istanbul minorities ( Istanbul Rum) in Turkey have been living well in recent years and as far as I know, they support Erdogan. All churches and association buildings were renovated, Imroz was revived, reconstructed, rites are free, the ceremony of throwing the cross into the sea can be held. When I lived in Istanbul, there were no such things in my time. There is concern that the situation will deteriorate greatly if others come to power. In other words, there is a fear in the Greek public that a conflict with the neighbor will occur when the Kemalists come to power. We are all people who want peace, I hope the situation in Europe, the sparks do not jump to us.

\*Istanbul Convention: The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe opposing violence against women and domestic violence which was opened for signature on 11 May 2011. Turkey withdrew from the convention in 2021.