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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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26.03.2025

## Opposition Unrest Continues in Turkey

**The struggle for power remains a sensitive issue in all countries, regardless of their level of democratic development. So, what led to the arrest of the main opponent of Turkey's current president, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu?**

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It seemed that the question of Turkey's presidential election had been settled with the results of the 2023 vote. There is still considerable time until the next scheduled elections in 2028, and no one can rule out the possibility of Erdoğan running again. However, early elections are also not out of the question if domestic political circumstances and legal changes necessitate them.

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### **The Motivation Behind İmamoğlu's Arrest: Government vs. Opposition Perspectives**

What was the reason for the March 19 arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu? According to reports circulating in the media, Turkish authorities accuse the popular opposition figure from the Republican People's Party (CHP) of corruption and ties to terrorist organizations.

The official stance is that the mayor of Istanbul — a key financial and business hub in Turkey — allegedly facilitated money laundering and other illegal financial operations by certain companies. Specifically, subsidiaries of the Istanbul municipality (such as Medya AŞ, Kültür AŞ, KİPTAŞ, and ISFALT) reportedly won municipal tenders in violation of the law, inflated service prices, and profited from these schemes. The work carried out by these companies was often allegedly incomplete or fictitious, with funds being misappropriated for personal enrichment.

Additionally, both during and after the election period, İmamoğlu maintained contacts with Kurdish political forces, including representatives of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Through these connections, he is said to have formed a “citywide consensus” and engaged with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — recognized as a terrorist organization in Turkey — with the alleged aim of influencing national and municipal election results.

The arrest of the opposition leader just days before March 24 — when Turkey was set to hold primaries for the next presidential election — was perceived by some of the public and the opposition as a political crisis orchestrated by Erdoğan. The move was seen as an attempt to prevent a strong contender from participating in upcoming (whether regular or early) presidential elections. As a result, mass protests erupted in Istanbul and other regions, with the opposition portraying the two criminal cases against İmamoğlu as a politically motivated effort to eliminate an inconvenient rival.

The authorities, naturally, hold a different view and accuse the opposition of unjustified politicization of the investigation. Justice Minister Yılmaz Tunç dismissed claims that İmamoğlu's arrest was politically motivated and called the calls for street protests “disinformation.” In turn, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused the opposition of attempting to politicize the situation and cover up their own problems. He specifically noted, *“The opposition knows that most of this information and documents [regarding İmamoğlu's case] were handed over to the judicial authorities by their own officials.”*

As the investigation progresses, Turkish law enforcement must reach a decision regarding not only İmamoğlu but also approximately 100 other individuals detained and arrested in connection with the aforementioned charges. No one denies the existence of corruption in modern Turkey, but the real question is: why would the frontrunner for the opposition CHP in the presidential election be targeted?

Regarding the accusations of İmamoğlu's ties with Kurdish forces, the issue is highly complex. The mayor of Istanbul, like the leaders of other Turkish regions, cannot completely ignore or avoid contacts with citizens of Kurdish origin in his work. Moreover, Turkish authorities themselves are interested in a peaceful resolution to the ongoing problems, which would be nearly impossible without consensus. Furthermore, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Erdoğan's close ally in the ruling coalition, called on Abdullah Öcalan, the head of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — which is banned and designated as a terrorist organization by Ankara — to address parliament and announce its dissolution. Escalating the Kurdish issue to the brink of civil conflict would be highly

disadvantageous for Turkey's leadership, especially given the current domestic and international challenges (such as the crisis in Syria).

At the same time, it is no secret that prior to İmamoğlu's arrest, Turkish media had been discussing allegations that the mayor of Istanbul lacked a higher education degree. İmamoğlu categorically denied such claims, stating that he graduated from Istanbul University, and numerous witnesses — including professors and students — could confirm this. However, while this issue has not been officially raised at present, the administration of Istanbul University has nevertheless declared İmamoğlu's diploma invalid, allegedly due to procedural violations when he transferred in 1990 from Girne American University in Northern Cyprus to Istanbul. According to Turkish regulations, the absence of a higher education degree disqualifies a person from running for the presidency.

On the morning of March 23, a court in Istanbul sanctioned the arrest of the city's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, [CNN Türk reports](#). The court ruled that İmamoğlu, who is accused of corruption, will remain in prison until the trial concludes.

If he is acquitted, public concerns will become irrelevant, and he will return to his official duties, with his candidacy for the presidential elections from the CHP also being decided. However, if found guilty, the investigation will continue, and a trusted appointee may be installed as mayor by the Interior Ministry's request, or Istanbul may hold early municipal elections for a new mayor. Accordingly, İmamoğlu would be barred from running in the presidential race.

Among the opposition and the liberal-minded segment of Turkish society that supports İmamoğlu, there remains suspicion that this criminal case is politically motivated. The goal, they argue, is to eliminate a strong candidate and a representative of Turkey's new generation of pro-Western political elites from the upcoming presidential elections.

**Is there a foreign influence behind Turkey's political crisis?** President Erdoğan remains an inconvenient partner for the U.S. and much of Europe (except, evidently, the United Kingdom). These tensions stem from Erdoğan's independent policies aimed at strengthening Turkey's regional and global standing in international affairs. The West is particularly uneasy about Turkey's partnerships with Russia and China, its ongoing disputes with Israel, Ankara's stance on conflicts in Libya and Syria, and its position on issues related to Armenia and Karabakh.

The U.S. and key European countries were dissatisfied with Erdoğan's negotiations over Finland and Sweden's NATO accession. The fate of the 2023 presidential election between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was arguably decided through possible secret

agreements with Washington regarding Turkey's approval of Finland and Sweden joining NATO (Finland received Ankara's approval after the first round of elections in May, while Sweden secured it after the second round in June).

However, everything flows, everything changes. A new administration under President Donald Trump now governs the U.S., and tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations over Syria continue to pose a risk. For security reasons, following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Israel has established full control over the "security zone" in the Golan Heights (including Mount Hermon) and continues conducting airstrikes in other parts of Syria (Damascus, Latakia, Tartus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, etc.). Meanwhile, Turkey supports a puppet regime in Damascus led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a terrorist organization banned in Russia) and, together with him, seeks to neutralize Kurdish forces in northern Syria. This creates the possibility of a direct confrontation between Israel and Turkey in Syrian territory.

The U.S. president is Israel's key ally and is unlikely to allow Turkish-Israeli tensions in Syria to escalate further. Accordingly, Erdoğan's firm stance on Gaza's future (specifically, his rejection of the American plan to relocate the local Arab population) and the issue of Syrian Kurds could prompt a reassessment of relations with Turkey. In this context, the U.S. and Israel, seeking to prevent military tensions with Turkey, may favor Erdoğan's main political opponent, the pro-Western liberal İmamoğlu. However, for this to happen, he must participate in the March 24 primary — something that does not align with Erdoğan's interests.

Dismissing this possibility outright would be unwise, but asserting it definitively is also difficult.

Alexandr Svaranc, March 25, 2025

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