

After the Earthquakes: Turkish Elections, Politics and Foreign Policy in 2023

This is the summary of the online and in-person public event held on 8 June 2023.

You can access the [podcast here](#) and the [video here](#).

Summary by Dr Arzu Kırca Şahin



On June 8, 2023, Contemporary Turkish Studies and LSE IDEAS organised an online and in-person public event titled **"After the Earthquakes: Turkish Elections, Politics, and Foreign Policy in 2023."**

The speakers were **Yaprak Gürsoy**, Professor of European Politics and Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE; **Buğra Süsler**, Lecturer in the UCL Department of Political Science and Visiting Fellow at LSE IDEAS; **Özge Zihnioğlu**, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Liverpool.

Chris Alden, Professor of International Relations and Director of LSE IDEAS, chaired the event and warmly welcomed everyone present. Professor Alden introduced the prominent speakers who would be examining the consequences of the earthquakes that occurred on February 6, 2023, on Turkish society, politics, and foreign policy. Two earthquakes, measuring 7.6–7.8 in magnitude, caused a major disaster in Turkey and neighbouring Syria. Over 50,000 people lost their lives, and 2.5 million were displaced, highlighting the magnitude of the tragedy. The economic losses and burdens were estimated to be equivalent to 8% of Turkey's GDP. Professor Alden then listed the speakers and their respective topics. The first speaker, Professor Yaprak Gürsoy, would address the extent to which the earthquakes impacted the outcomes of the May 2023 general election. The second speaker, Dr Özge Zihnioğlu, would discuss how the earthquakes and subsequent relief efforts influenced civil society and state-society relations. Finally, Dr Buğra Süsler would examine whether Turkish foreign policy changed as a result of international expressions of solidarity.

Professor Yaprak Gürsoy shared preliminary results from a project conducted in collaboration with Dr Buğra Güngör and Friedrich Püttmann. The project, supported by the LSE Urgency Grant, involved a public opinion survey conducted before the elections, which sampled 2811 individuals representing Turkish society.

Professor Gürsoy proceeded to present the results of the Presidential elections, emphasising that despite the expectations of earthquake-related impacts on the election outcomes, Erdoğan and AKP emerged as the winners. She noted that the earthquake zone predominantly voted for Erdoğan, contrary to the anticipated negative impact. Professor Gürsoy attributed this outcome to pre-established party perceptions, commonly referred to as affective polarisation or affective attachments.

She highlighted the emotional attachment of individuals to the AKP and President Erdoğan, stating that these attachments influenced their interpretation of the earthquakes and subsequent events.

To support her argument, Professor Gürsoy referred to survey data that indicated a strong connection between party support and perceptions of disaster management. While approximately 46% of all respondents believed the government's disaster management was poor, only 11% of those who voted for the AKP in 2018 held this view. Conversely, 75% of AKP voters from 2018 regarded the government's handling of the earthquakes as good or very good. This stark contrast demonstrated the impact of party perceptions on disaster management evaluation.

Professor Gürsoy acknowledged that further research was required to explore the complete impact of earthquakes on election results. However, she hinted at potential differences in voting intentions among those who experienced losses due to the earthquakes. Analysing data related to loss and voting intentions, she highlighted that 81% of AKP voters from 2018 who experienced no loss intended to vote for the party again in May 2023, whereas only 69% of those who suffered losses expressed the same intention.

She acknowledged the different interpretations of these findings, emphasising that while most of those who experienced losses still supported the AKP, there was a 12-point difference compared to those who did not suffer losses. This indicated that individuals who experienced losses in the earthquakes may have been more likely to consider alternative voting options.

Professor Gürsoy concluded by highlighting the importance of party perceptions in influencing voters' interpretations of events. She emphasised the need for additional research to delve deeper into the impact of earthquakes on elections and voting behaviour.

Dr Özge Zihnioğlu acknowledged the focus on post-earthquake efforts by NGOs when discussing disasters and civil society. The efficiency of their mobilisation and the things that went wrong were often the centres of attention, while the impact of the actual earthquakes on civil society received less consideration.

Dr Zihnioğlu believed it was important to discuss how a major disaster like the February earthquakes affected and could affect civil society in Turkey.

Recognising that the full impact of earthquakes on civil society was not easy to understand in a few months, Dr Zihnioğlu divided her talk into three parts. She planned to speak about what the earthquakes revealed about civil society in Turkey, what they would have liked to see from civil society but may not have witnessed, and the potential long-term effects of the earthquakes on civil society.

Dr Zihnioğlu emphasised that the earthquakes, although a destructive catastrophe on its own, could not be viewed independently of the societal and political dynamics in Turkey. She intended to make references to elections and other societal and political factors in Turkey during her discussion.

In the short term, after the earthquakes, civil society became highly active. There was a sudden outburst of aid and volunteers, supported by a presidential decree that expanded the scope of NGO work in disaster-related activities. Material and non-material aid flowed to the affected region, particularly in areas like search and rescue and humanitarian aid. The NGOs and various citizen initiatives swiftly mobilised and aided.

However, Dr Zihnioğlu acknowledged that the situation was more complex. The government expanded the scope of civil society activity but also exerted pressure on certain individuals, groups, and organisations that were perceived as rivals or challenges to public institutions. She mentioned AHBAP, a charity organisation that raised a significant amount of funds for earthquakes relief and faced threats and reactions from high-level political figures. The government aimed to be seen as the primary solution provider and considered the NGOs as competitors.

Dr Zihnioğlu pointed out the highly polarized environment in Turkey, which has affected collaboration among civil society organizations. While some cooperation was observed after the earthquakes, it remained limited and selective, with divisions based on political or ideological affiliations. The elections further deepened this divide, as NGOs close to the government disregarded the government's responsibility, and charitable aid became polarized based on political preferences.

Despite the opportunities presented by the earthquakes, Dr Zihnioğlu noted that civil society could not fully address its own problems and limitations. The earthquakes could have been a chance to discuss issues such as sustainable fundraising, volunteerism, empowerment of local NGOs, and cooperation between local and national civic organizations. However, she believed that civil society failed to seize this opportunity and missed the chance to raise and discuss these crucial issues with both the public and state institutions.

In conclusion, Dr Zihnioğlu highlighted the importance of understanding the impact of major disasters on civil society and urged for a comprehensive discussion on the role of civil society in the face of such challenges. She expressed the need to overcome polarization, enhance collaboration, and address long-standing issues within civil society for a more resilient and effective response to future disasters.

Dr Buğra Süsler mentioned that after the earthquakes, over 80 countries sent foreign rescue units to Turkey, raising the question of whether Turkish foreign policy had changed due to international solidarity. He briefly answered, saying that he believed it had not.

Dr Süsler explained that while earthquakes provided opportunities to improve bilateral relations and mend broken ties, the key factor was political will. He mentioned the concept of earthquake diplomacy, referring to the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey and Greece that led to improved relations between the two countries. However, he emphasised that the earthquakes alone were not solely responsible for the positive outcome. The mutual political will to cooperate and key individuals working towards rapprochement played significant roles.

Dr Süsler noted that the term earthquake diplomacy had been used again following recent earthquakes in Turkey, suggesting potential improvements in Turkey-Armenia relations and Greece-Turkey relations. However, he remained sceptical about long-term rapprochement solely based on earthquakes, emphasizing the importance of existing political will and ongoing processes of normalization.

Moving on to broader observations about Turkish foreign policy, Dr Süsler discussed Turkey's relationship with the West, specifically Turkey-EU relations.

He anticipated no major changes, highlighting the transactional nature of their current relationship. He mentioned the EU's view of Turkey as an important partner for issues like border security and migration.

Dr Süssler also discussed the pursuit of strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy, which aimed to increase Turkey's influence both internationally and regionally. He highlighted Turkey's role as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war, showcasing its pursuit of autonomy and balance.

He mentioned Turkey's focus on niche diplomacies, such as its drone power and closer relations with African states, driven by historical ties and shared discourses. Another trend he observed was the increasing use of military instruments to achieve foreign policy objectives, particularly in Turkey's neighbourhood. He acknowledged that hard power projection had become a significant aspect of contemporary Turkish foreign policy, especially in the Middle East.

In conclusion, Dr Süssler expressed his expectations for Turkey's foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of political will, transactional relationships, strategic autonomy, and the use of military instruments to achieve objectives.