

# Turkey's growing civil unrest shows that citizens are prepared to defend democracy, with or without help from the EU

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*Turkish police used tear gas to disperse protesters in Istanbul and Ankara on 31 May, following demonstrations held on the first anniversary of the anti-government Gezi Park protests which began last year. **Firat Cengiz** writes on the country's increasingly tense political situation, which was also exacerbated by unrest over the recent mine disaster at Soma. She argues that while the EU appears reluctant to marginalise the ruling AKP government in light of the Ukraine crisis, the absence of EU conditionality may have inadvertently aided the emergence of a vibrant opposition.*



At last month's Cannes Film Festival, the highly talented Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan won the Palme d'Or with 'Kış Uykusu' ([Winter Sleep](#)). Thirty-two years ago, Yılmaz Güney, a Turkish director of Kurdish origin, had won the same award with 'Yol' ([the Journey](#)). Despite three decades that set them apart, the two directors unite in their blunt yet beautiful portrayal of the lives of Turkish society's underdogs as well as their genuine love for their country. Whilst giving the same pose to the cameras as Güney, Ceylan [dedicated](#) his award to "...those who lost their lives in the last year". In this, he paid tribute to the victims of police brutality during the Gezi Park protests as well as the victims of the recent Soma mine accident.

The Turkish government and the media that is largely controlled by it ignored the remarkable success of Ceylan as they ignored the success of Güney. Orhan Pamuk's 2006 Nobel Literary Prize was met with similar apathy by the secularist opposition ranks, who were offended by Pamuk's sympathy towards the [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP) government. Turkey's diverse society has been divided along several political, religious and cultural lines by the country's increasingly hostile political discourse particularly since the [1980 military coup](#). Talented children of this self-defeating country face ruthless machineries of ignorance before they reach success only to offend the country's political establishment.

The AKP government and Prime Minister Erdoğan have systematically adopted a polarising discourse since their third general election [victory in 2011](#). All social groups apart from Turkey's conservative Sunni majority have been targets of this hostile discourse, including women, Kurdish, Alaouite, LGBT, and other religious and cultural minorities. Erdoğan openly [praised](#) police brutality during the Gezi Park protests. The brutality has been repeated on the [first anniversary](#) of the Gezi protests during which more than hundred protesters have been arrested in several cities, including Istanbul and Ankara. In the 2014 local election rallies Erdoğan made AKP supporters [jeer](#) Berkin Elvan's mother. [Berkin](#) was shot by a teargas canister and died at the age of 15 – becoming a symbol of resistance against the AKP's authoritarianism.

With confidence boosted by his party's 45.6 per cent [local election victory](#) in March, Erdoğan did not change his hostile tone even in the shadow of the Soma mine accident. The [accident](#) took place during a shift change between over 700 workers. The coal mine ran by a contractor with alleged ties to the government lacked [life rooms](#), which turned the accident into a massacre. The official [death toll](#) has now reached 301, but several bodies will never be recovered from the collapsed mine shafts. Yet, according to Erdoğan, such accidents are in the [nature](#) of mining.

For the first time in his political career, Erdoğan faced [direct public outrage](#) during his visit to Soma. He sought refuge in a grocery store where he allegedly [assaulted](#) a citizen. His aide was [photographed](#) brutally kicking a protestor. Since the accident, Soma, otherwise a quiet town on the country's Aegean Coast, is governed with unofficial emergency rules: in addition to [extreme security measures](#), AKP supporters [intimidate](#) members of the

press, and they disperse the public to prevent protests.

Hostility and polarisation continues in other parts of the country. In Istanbul's largely Alaouite populated Okmeydani district, two citizens [were shot dead](#) by the police during solidarity protests with Soma accident victims. Members of this misunderstood and stigmatised sect of Islam feel a high degree of intimidation: both because the police shooting that left [Uğur Kurt](#) dead took place in a Cemevi (Alaouite temple), and because a majority of the protestors killed by the police since the Gezi protests, including Berkin Elvan, were Alaouites.

Only weeks after the worst mining accident in its history, Turkey has a completely new political agenda: preparations are in full swing for the country's first direct [presidential elections](#) that will take place in August 2014.

Turkey's President used to be elected by the Parliament, but the Constitution was [amended in 2007](#)

to foresee public elections after non-majoritarian institutions – the Constitutional Court and military – meddled in the election of the current President, Abdullah Gül. Prime Minister Erdoğan has long wished to become the country's first publicly elected President and is expected to be the AKP's candidate. Since the opposition is very unlikely to nominate a candidate with the same level of popularity, Erdoğan's wish will come true barring a political miracle.

Erdoğan is not content with the currently symbolic powers of the President. Thus, the AKP's key priority in the [constitutional reform process](#) that continues in parallel is to establish a semi-presidential regime. The reform process is the most extensive in the Turkish Republic's history, with the Parliament drafting a new constitution without military involvement. Initially, the process was perceived as a window of opportunity for the design of a truly democratic constitution, protecting fundamental rights and freedoms as well as minority and cultural rights. In the shadow of the increasingly hostile political discourse these hopes have fallen short. Due to deep divergences between the four political parties represented in the Parliament, the future of the reform process is now [uncertain](#).

Once elected President, Erdoğan is expected to push for constitutional amendments and rely on other methods to further entrench his hold on power. Erdoğan is as frightened as he is outraged by the widespread political protests, which are reminiscent of the beginning of the Arab Spring. In the shadow of the recently released evidence of widespread [corruption](#) in the government, Erdoğan and some other high ranking AKP members need their political power and immunity against criminal investigations.

The European Union has been surprisingly silent against the AKP government's increasing authoritarianism. Arguably, in the shadow of the recent security threats raised by Russia, the EU is reluctant to further marginalise Erdoğan and to lose a security partner. In any case, the EU has largely [lost its leverage](#) over Turkey since Cyprus' EU accession, which caused a stalemate in Turkey's own negotiations.

On a more positive note, the weakness of EU conditionality might partially explain the unexpected emergence of vibrant opposition during the Gezi Park protests: having lost a powerful external partner in the search for democracy, Turkey's civil society has to rely on grassroots methods. Similarly, acts of solidarity, such as the [Roboski victims' relatives' visit to Soma](#), show that despite the polarising discourse, the society remains united against injustice and authoritarianism.

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Turkish 'Çevik Kuvvet' (riot police) in Istanbul. Credit: Eser Karadağ (CC-BY-



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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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