

International Workshop

Unpacking ‘the Opposition’ in undemocratic regimes: The Role, Transformation and Challenges of the Oppositional Actors in Turkey and beyond

November 27, 2020 | Culture, Politics and Society Department – University of Turin and via Webex

The landslide victory of the main opposition party (the Republican People’s Party, CHP) in Turkey’s 2019 municipal elections marks a surprising moment in Turkish politics and the end of an intense decade. Although tacit and contested, a cooperation between the CHP, its nationalist allies (Iyi Parti), and the pro-Kurdish Democratic People’s Party (HDP) made possible a political reshuffle on the local level of politics, which many would not have thought was still possible after a decade of authoritarian centralization. Although the government continues to criminalize and persecute the opposition, particularly the HDP by suspending the democratically elected mayors, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) emerged deeply rattled and insecure. However, what is considered to be ‘the electoral success’ of the opposition parties in Turkey *could not be possible without a sustained civic and social opposition* that kept the grassroots organized, and developed alternative channels of participation and production of democratic demands.

The purpose of this workshop is to initiate a debate on the opposition in Turkey and contribute to the theorization of the role, transformation, mobilization strategies and different forms of the opposition in undemocratic regimes. The growing scholarly interest in de-democratization and the emergence of several forms of hybrid regimes has created an extensive literature on the institutional erosion and ‘liquid regimes’, the monopolization and constellations of the executive power and the political economy of hybridization across the world. However, the role and the changing forms of the opposition(s) under the process of autocratization remains undertheorized.

In academic debates, ‘the opposition’ is mostly utilized in reference to political parties and categorized as ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ based on their electoral performance. While the political opposition is crucial in undemocratic regimes without doubt, the lack of an in-depth theorization on the forms, agency and transformation of the opposition(s) is highly problematic. As Schedler (2013) argues, despite the political violence and high odds against ‘their success’ in the traditional sense, the oppositions persist in many different forms, incentivize ways of alternative participation, demand democratic rights and protest. In this sense, it might be more useful to consider ‘*many*’ oppositions (political/civic/social, local/national, formal/informal) and investigate several ways in which they articulate their demands and counter the challenges they face.

What does it mean to be an opposition in autocratizing regimes? How do the oppositional actors organize in and outside the political party arena? What are their activities and strategies under the autocratic limitations on the basic freedoms? How do institutionalized political opposition and organized civic and social opposition in Turkey cooperate? In which areas does a lack of communication between the two pose challenges for oppositional activity? How do the oppositional forces enhance forms of cooperation which go beyond the electoral campaigns and voting? How do ‘the oppositions’ in Turkey compare with oppositions in similar contexts? Relying on the literature on party politics, political contention, social movements and infrapolitics, the workshop invites original contributions on topics covering but not strictly limited to:

- **Defining the opposition:** We aim to go beyond the dichotomies of failed or successful opposition and consider the role of the opposition in the long term. Can we define sustained or sustainable opposition(s) or an ‘oppositional space’ instead?
- **The role of the opposition(s) in Turkey and beyond:** Most of the time the oppositional activity in undemocratic regimes does not directly aim at regime change or organize as political opposition. However, it is also different from the ‘loyal opposition’ that are organized by the autocratic incumbents (as historically seen in Belarus, Azerbaijan etc.). The oppositional actors in Turkey still challenge the political and ideological hegemony of the AKP. How can we make sense of the distinct oppositional activity under escalating authoritarian rule? How to conceptualize ‘veto players’ initiatives coming from the opposition? And how do they inform about the role of the opposition in the consolidation of the undemocratic regime?
- **Actors, forms and activities of the opposition:**
 - **Electoral politics, organized party opposition:** Particularly, we would like to investigate the opposition parties beyond the electoral game and understand the obstacles for cooperation in the long-term among them as well as the ideological, political, socio-economic and other linkages (or lack thereof) between opposition parties and the electorate.
 - **Civic, social and bottom-up opposition:** Various forms of civil society, dissent, protests, street action. Particularly, the role of grassroots public creativity, the culture of protest and syncretic oppositional activity across ideological and socio-political cleavages.
 - **Media-opposition:** The role of the online, independent and critical media outlets in challenging or replacing the government-controlled media’s hegemony.
 - **Diasporic oppositions:** The regime change in Turkey has deeply affected intra-diaspora relations. A considerable segment of the diaspora in Europe supports the AKP. We would like to investigate the continuing role of the traditional oppositional diasporic activity (e.g. Kurdish and Alevi diasporas) as well as discuss the emergence of Gülenist exile groups as ‘the self-defined’ new opposition abroad.
 - **International actors:** The forms and effects of international actors on strengthening the oppositional voices (e.g. the EU/ Europe). Besides the effect of the EU on the institutional and/or civic oppositions in Turkey, we would like to also discuss if international support could play into the hands of the government that seeks opportunities to deepen the polarization between the ‘authentic’ nation and the opposition labelled as ‘traitors’ and ‘Trojan horses’ supported by Europe.
- **The relations, linkages and cooperation problems between the above-mentioned groups.**

The workshop invites *theoretical and empirical contributions*. It encourages *interdisciplinary approaches at the intersection of political science, sociology, history and anthropology*. Papers that **present original empirical findings** and theoretical insights that cast light onto how the opposition is testing novel forms of cooperation on the ground, and if and to what extent ‘the oppositions’ use the public space for their advance are particularly welcome. **Studies with comparative perspectives** covering similar regimes (e.g. Hungary, Serbia, Brazil, Russia, India etc.) are especially encouraged.

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the workshop will be held in a hybrid format at the Culture, Politics and Society Department – University of Turin (Italy) and online (via Webex platform).

The workshop will be convened by Prof. Rosita Di Peri (University of Turin), Prof. Lea Nocera (University of Naples L'Orientale), Prof. Kerem Öktem (Northwestern University), Dr. Chiara Maritato (University of Turin), Dr. Bilge Yabanci (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Please send your abstracts (max 500 words) and a short bio (200-250 words) by October 31 to Dr Chiara Maritato (chiara.maritato@unito.it) and Dr Bilge Yabanci (bilge.yabanci@unive.it).