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Governance crises and resilience of competitive authoritarian regimes: Turkish elections of 2023 from the perspective of Hirschman's "exit, voice, loyalty"

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Introduction

Turkish citizens went to the polls in consequential presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14, 2023 —the Republic's centennial year. The most important outcome was the re-election of President Erdoğan for another five-year term, dashing the hopes of many who had seen the elections as an opportunity for democratic renewal in the country. It was a success for Erdoğan, but not an unmitigated one. His party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), won 35 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary election, but this was the second-lowest figure in over 20 years. In the presidential election, although Erdoğan emerged as the leading presidential candidate in the first round, he did not pass the 50 per cent threshold, so a second round took place on May 28. The opposition had a certain degree of success as well. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate of the opposition block (Nation Alliance), secured 48 per cent of the votes in the second round, considerably more than the share obtained by Péter Márki-Zay in the comparable Hungarian elections of April 2022 from which Viktor Orban emerged the outright winner. Yet what mattered in the end was that Erdoğan and his governing coalition won the pivotal elections despite economic hardships, a devastating earthquake, and a series of governance failures in domestic and foreign policy realms. This outcome will have significant repercussions for Turkish politics and beyond.

Although significant democratic backsliding and a highly uneven playing field, elections matter in Turkey. The country does not have an established authoritarian system, nor was the regime formed through a "violent liberation struggle" that is typically resilient to crises.[1] Instead, generating and sustaining patronage networks, mainly through the mobilisation of state resources, constitute the foundations of the regime legitimacy. Hence, the governance failures were expected to upset the political equilibrium, and the opposition seemed to have a reasonable chance of winning. The resilience of the government under these circumstances makes the Turkish case puzzling and relevant to the broader literature. In this paper, we offer an integrated political economy perspective to explain how Erdoğan convinced people to stay loyal despite significant governance failures.

"Economic voting" theory suggests governing parties are likely to lose elections when there have been significant economic difficulties. As empirical studies document, this explains the previous Turkish experience, when poor economic performance undermined the legitimacy of ruling parties and led to their political demise (Akarca and Tansel 2006; Akarca 2019). This happened either through the process of electoral competition (e.g., the coalition government lost power in November 2002, paving the way for the rise of the AKP) or through military interventions (e.g., the end of the Democrat Party rule in 1960 and the fall of the coalition government led by the Justice Party in 1980).

The May 2023 elections are puzzling because public support for President Erdoğan did not erode despite political-economic failures of considerable magnitude. The economy was ailing, the government's performance in containing natural disasters was dismal, and oscillations in

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[1] On the extraordinary resilience of authoritarian regimes formed through "violent liberation struggles", see Levitsky and Way (2012). For a review of the literature on authoritarian durability, see Levitsky and Way (2015).

foreign policy were perplexing. What explains the striking electoral resilience of the regime in the face of "multiple governance crises"?[2]

We adopt Albert O. Hirschman's "exit, voice, and loyalty" framework to address this question. Hirschman starts his insightful analysis with a straightforward question. How do individuals respond to the declining quality of products or services in their environment? There are, Hirschman suggests, two major options. First, they might simply exit; they "stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization" (Hirschman 1970: 4). Second, they might exercise the voice option; instead of silently exiting, they express their "dissatisfaction directly" hoping to improve the quality of products and services (Hirschman 1970: 4). A third option, loyalty, can be used as well; it either "postpones exit" (Hirschman 1970: 82) or "acts as a brake on the decision to exit" (Hirschman 1970: 88) without exercising the voice option. The "hallmark" of loyalty, as Hirschman (1970: 98) puts it, is the "reluctance to exit in spite of disagreement with the organization." At the same time, however, the loyalty option is almost always a function of the expectation that "someone will act and something will happen to improve matters" (Hirschman 1970: 78).

Hirschman's framework is widely applied across the social sciences.[3] In politics, in the face of declining quality of governance, a critical question is: under what conditions do voters exercise the exit option or remain loyal to the incumbent?[4] A citizen is likely to defect if "her exit payoff is greater than her loyalty payoff" (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017: 724). In this context, the

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[2] For full elaboration of the "multiple governance crisis" in Turkey, see Kutlay and Öniş (2021) and Öniş and Kutlay (2021). Also see Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman (2023).

[3] The elegance of the "exit, voice, and loyalty" framework is that, in Adelman's words, "it [has] that unique mix of being quickly grasped while exploding in many directions" (Adelman 2013: 440). Hirschman is a leading scholar well known for his desire and inspiring abilities to "trespass" on social science disciplines. For a collection of his essays on the topic, see Hirschman (1981). For excellent reviews of Hirschman's life, works, and legacy, see Özçelik (2014) and Adelman (2013).

[4] Also see Hirschman (1970: 84-85).

incumbent does two things: it increases the cost of exit (voting for the opposition) and voice (exercising freedom of expression) and increases the benefits of loyalty. It is important to underline that voice —both on the government and opposition sides— is a hallmark of effective democratic governance and critical to keeping political elites in check. However, "voice is costly because activities like protesting, complaining and lobbying all require effort that could be put to an alternative use" (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017: 723). This is especially true in competitive authoritarian regimes where governments frequently use the state's coercive capacity and mobilise public resources to punish dissenters arbitrarily, co-opt capital holders, and exercise political patronage to favour supporters.

Opposition parties can play a critical role in this context by reducing the risks and uncertainty associated with alternative political economy equilibria and gaining the trust of the voters through effective leadership, political coordination, and economic distribution strategies. The main goal for the opposition is to reduce the perceived cost of exit and voice and increase the expected benefits for voters to convince them to deny their loyalty to the incumbent. We should also note that exit can take different forms in competitive authoritarian regimes. For example, opposition voters may withdraw from politics altogether; alternatively, especially well-educated or wealthier Turkish citizens may decide to leave the country if they are repeatedly disappointed by the political developments —what is called "voting with one's feet" (Hirschman 1978: 95, 100, 103). The activation of this kind of "seesaw or hydraulic exit-voice model", As Hirschman (1993: 178, 186) highlights, would undermine voice. It is especially true in this circumstance that "the presence of the exit alternative can … tend to *atrophy the development of the art of voice*" (Hirschman 1970: 43, emphasis in original). This would inevitably lead to a decline in the quality and collective mobilization capacity of the opposition,

which, in turn, would bolster the regime's stability and resilience as an unintended consequence.[5]

Then, in the Hirschmanian sense, we ask the following questions. Why did loyalty prevail over exit and voice for Turkish voters? How did Erdoğan tilt the balance in his favour, keeping his support base loyal despite remarkable governance failures? Our main argument is that economic challenges per se were insufficient to break the resilience and electoral popularity of competitive authoritarian regimes. It is not because economic factors do not matter. In fact, the opposite is true —voters respond to deteriorations in the quality of governance. More important is the overall balance for the voters between the (perceived) benefits of remaining loyal to the regime and the costs of withdrawing their support and exiting. As we see it, in an institutional context where public space is compressed by the government (discussed below), several mechanisms dilute the relationship between economic performance and electoral success. Ultimately, in the Turkish case, President Erdoğan managed to create a political economy equilibrium by increasing the cost of exit and voice for citizens and devised policies to increase the benefits for those who remained loyal. The opposition block of parties, on the other hand, failed to disturb this equilibrium and was unable to convince voters to change their preferences.

The "exit, voice, and loyalty" equilibrium in the 2023 Turkish elections requires multidimensional analysis along two dimensions, each interacting with and mutually reinforcing the other: the economy-identity nexus and the domestic-external nexus. We contend that a particularistic and isolated approach would lead to incomplete policy recommendations towards a possible re-democratisation of the country. A caveat is in order, however. We use the

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[5] See Hirschman (1978: 103-105). Hirschman also discusses the interplay between exit and voice in reference to the debate on public and private schools (Hirschman, 1970: 44-54). Also, see Hirschman (1993) for an application of the "seesaw exit-voice model" to the case of German Democratic Republic.

"exit, voice, and loyalty" framework as an "analytic tool", not a "predictive tool", aiming to determine tipping points for each option empirically.[6] Hirschman (1982: 1483) urges social scientists to "embrace complexity." In the spirit of Hirschman's approach, we focus on the multidimensional nature of the emergent regime in Turkey, even if this analysis might "sacrifice" some "predictive power."[7]

When Do Governance Crises Fail to Undermine a Competitive Authoritarian Regime?

In the early years, the AKP government had significant economic success. An unusually favourable international environment contributed to strong economic growth. High growth was also enabled by a stabilised economy and significant regulatory reforms. Financial stability, the fiscal discipline of the state, improvements in total factor productivity, and the ability to bring inflation down to single-digit levels fostered sustained economic growth.[8] Improvements in poverty and income inequality further boosted AKP's electoral performance (Figure 2; also see Öniş 2012). Yet from about 2015 onwards, a familiar "populist cycle," previously associated with both majoritarian and coalition governments in Turkish economic history, became ascendant. In particular, the formal transition to the presidential regime in June 2018 was accompanied by rising macroeconomic instability. Major currency shocks were experienced during the summer of 2018 and November 2021. Following a series of interest rate cuts by the Central Bank starting in December 2021, inflation soared. Attempts to stabilise the exchange rate through the backdoor interventions of the central bank depleted the foreign currency reserves. Also, contrary to the government's expectations, the depreciation of the Turkish lira

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[6] For more on Hirschman's model as an "analytic" and "predictive tool," see Dowding et al. (2000).

[7] For more on the "complexity" and "predictive power" of social sciences, see Hirschman (1982).

[8] It is, however, important to underline that the early AKP governments failed to adopt active industrial policies to upgrade Turkey's production and trade structure toward high-value-added sectors. Moreover, some critical privatization decisions proved short-sighted, leading to significant problems. For more on this, see Toksöz, Kutlay and Hale (2023, chapter 5). For the increase in total factor productivity in the early 2000s, see Acemoğlu and Üçer (2021).

failed to improve a massive current account deficit, thus rendering the growth process fragile and unstable (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Rising inflation, depreciating Turkish lira, and growing current account deficit
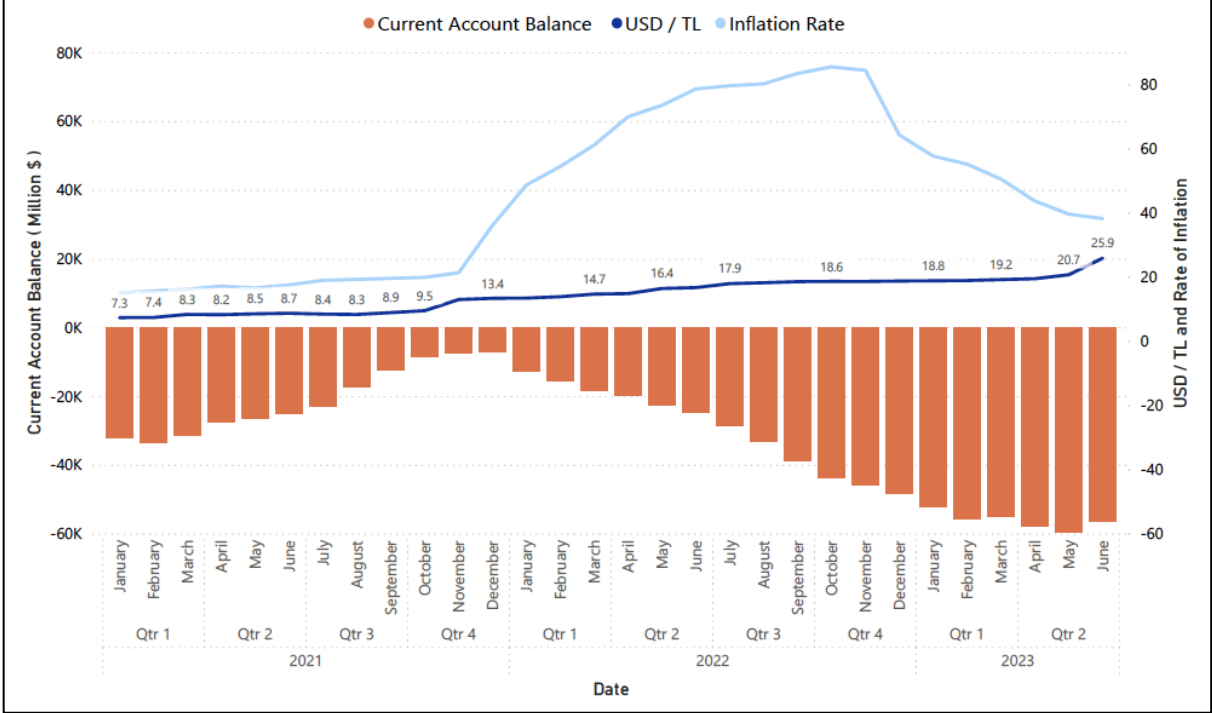
Rising macroeconomic volatility has been associated with growing income and wealth inequality. In Turkey, after noticeable improvement in the early AKP era, the Gini coefficient started to deteriorate in the 2010s, culminating in a major distributive shock with the introduction of the "new economic model" in December 2021. It is striking that Turkey is one of the most unequal countries among its peers. According to World Inequality database estimates, the top 1 per cent of the population receives 18.8 per cent of the national income, and the bottom 50 per cent gets just 14.2 per cent (versus 22.2 and 9.2 per cent for Brazil, 15.2 and 19.3 per cent for Poland, 23.8 and 15.7 per cent for Russia, 11.1 and 22.5 per cent for Hungary).[9] Figure 2 demonstrates that wealth distribution in Turkey is even more concerning. In this already disturbingly unequal distributional context, the urban poor and middle classes have had to bear

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[9] All estimates are from 2021. All figures are estimated according to pre-tax national income.

the burden of the skyrocketing cost of living and the dwindling purchasing power of their real incomes.

Figure 2. Gini co-efficient, income and wealth inequality in Turkey
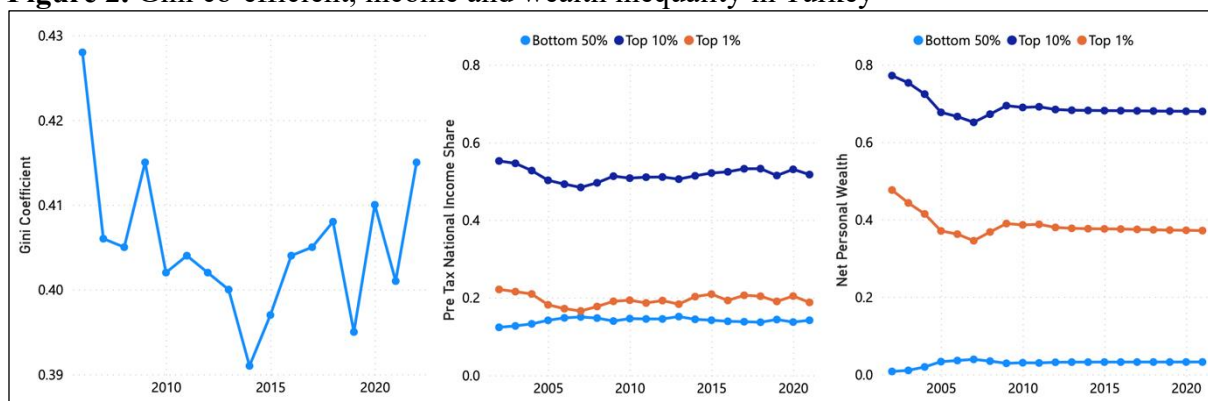
Source: Figures based on TÜİK and WID data. Gini co-efficient data from TÜİK; income and wealth data from World Inequality database.

Governance problems have not been confined to the economic sphere. The massive earthquake that hit 11 cities in Southeast Turkey three months before the 2023 elections exposed the organisational failures of state institutions. Fifty thousand people died because of the earthquake. This was admittedly a natural disaster of enormous magnitude, but many experts argue human costs could have been significantly reduced if appropriate precautions were taken in the first place. Following the devastating August 1999 earthquake, regulations were strengthened, and new codes specified higher construction standards. However, the improved regulations and standards were loosely implemented. Based on the logic of obtaining electoral support in the short run, periodic amnesty laws legitimised poor construction and thus led to massive human losses (Ülgen 2023). Other countries experiencing earthquakes of similar magnitude (e.g., Chile) registered much lower death tolls than Turkey in 2023. Criticisms were also levelled at the scale and intensity of relief efforts, especially in the early days. More lives could have been saved if state agencies had better coordination with civil initiatives and Turkey's sizeable military force had been deployed more actively (Tol 2023).

Under normal circumstances, the popularity of any government would have been seriously tarnished in the face of such significant shocks. Given the potentially solid reasons for voters to express discontent, the May 2023 elections are interesting, if not puzzling. Overall, pro-Erdoğan voters remained loyal to the regime, expressed limited voice, and dismissed exit as a principal way to express discontent. What did the government do to increase the perceived benefits of loyalty and the costs of voice and exit?

There are a number of possible explanations. Yet any analysis should start with the obvious point that the cost of voice and exit varies significantly according to the regime type. Political scientists use different labels to describe the Turkish presidential regime, which took shape through a series of steps over the last decade. Turkey is variously defined as a "hybrid regime", "electoral authoritarianism", "authoritarian populism," or "competitive authoritarianism." The underlying common denominator is that Turkey has shown significant democratic backsliding over the last decade. The independence of the judiciary and the media, protection of political rights and civil liberties, and fair treatment of the opposition as a legitimate actor on the political scene have been progressively undermined. The remaining democratic ingredient is periodic elections.

The term "competitive authoritarianism" most aptly characterises Turkey's current political regime (Özbudun 2015; Esen and Gumuscu 2016). It is competitive because elections are an integral part of the system. The playing field is highly skewed in favour of the government, and elections are not fair, but the ability to win elections still constitutes a significant legitimising feature of the regime in a country that is not rich in natural resources. Victory in elections opens considerable space to exercise political power beyond what would normally be associated with liberal or electoral democracies. At the same time, winning the most votes allows the leader and

the governing coalition to withstand criticism of the system as undemocratic and unaccountable. Under a similar logic, any criticism from external actors is portrayed as a violation of national sovereignty and can generate a backlash of nationalist sentiment operating in favour of the party in power. All these suggest voters may pay a high price if they choose the voice and exit options.

That said, in the recent Turkish elections, government supporters also had considerable incentives to maintain their loyalty. The first relates to the depth of the economic "crisis." The economic problems were significant but not profound enough to completely undermine Erdoğan and the ruling coalition. There was no collapse of economic growth or surge in unemployment, mostly because of credit expansion and external debt (Figure 3). Economic growth continued under the new presidential regime, albeit in a highly unbalanced fashion (Öniş 2023). Nevertheless, the ability to resume growth meant significant segments of society continued to benefit from the regime and were naturally willing to endorse it in the general elections.

We should also place the role of economic factors in a broader historical context. Erdoğan and the AKP have been in power for two decades. Given the continuous growth over this period (except in 2009; see Figure 3), many people have benefited economically from the AKP rule. The primary beneficiaries have been the new segments of the bourgeoisie with close ties to the party. Continuous growth has also facilitated the implementation of various redistributive mechanisms, enabling the construction of a cross-class coalition for electoral support. A striking illustration is in the realm of universities. Under AKP, the university sector has expanded dramatically, and a new university has opened in almost every city. There are 204 (public and private) universities in 2023, compared to 74 in 2002.[10] These may not be universities of

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[10] Data retrieved from the Higher Education Council website: https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr

international standing, nor does this expansion ensure the provision of higher-quality education and research, but the move has been popular because it has created additional economic demand in several cities, opened new avenues of employment for many individuals through clientelistic ties, and gave students new opportunities. Whilst the "optimality" of this massive university expansion is open to criticism, a certain political logic and "rationality" clearly underlies the process.

Figure 3. Positive growth and stable unemployment despite economic fluctuations
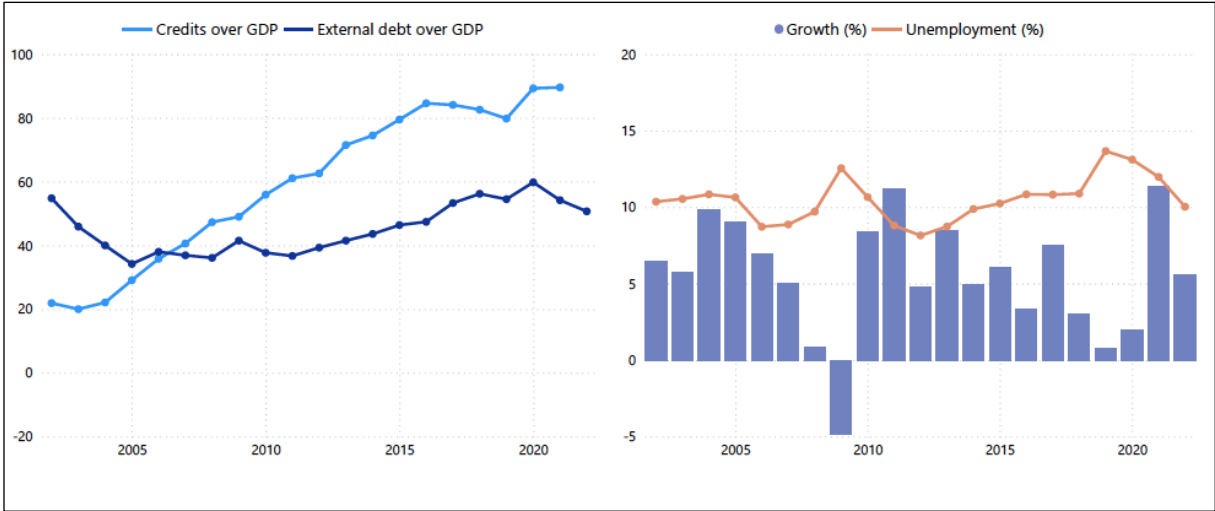
Source: "Credits over GDP" data retrieved from the Bank of International Settlements; "external debt over GDP" data retrieved from the Ministry of Treasury and Finance; "growth" and "unemployment" data retrieved from the World Bank, World Development Indicators database.

The fact that growth continued, albeit in a highly fragile fashion, allowed the government to engineer a variety of populist redistributive moves in the period leading up to the elections, and this mitigated the impact of economic difficulties, especially on pro-government voters (for details, see Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman 2023). One prominent example, the Law on Early Retirement, was popular, as it allowed around 2.2 million people to retire earlier and claim a pension. Another example was an increase in minimum wages and pensions for retired government employees. In this case, the government's strategy was to use populist redistribution to win the electoral contest first and then implement an austerity program to cover the fiscal costs of rising redistribution and prevent a complete economic collapse. The

government's earthquake strategy, similarly, involved massive housing projects based on the promise of early delivery, capitalising on the strength of the construction sector. This was also quite popular. As a result, in the May 2023 elections, the support for Erdoğan and the AKP in the earthquake regions was much higher than many analysts anticipated.

Ultimately, the government was not punished by its supporters because the economic crisis was not deep enough and had not been felt evenly across the country. The high cost of living, especially high rents for housing, was a significant problem in major metropolitan centres, but the impact was more subdued in rural areas and smaller towns in the country's inner regions. A cursory look at the electoral map suggests the opposition block performed better in major metropolitan centres, where the impact of the ongoing economic challenges was felt much more deeply.

The AKP government also pursued active social engineering policies to tilt the balance in favour of loyalty and against voice and exit. Controlling and manipulating the public information space played an instrumental role in these efforts. Although the government did not successfully manage the economy, it could shape public debates on the matter through its domination over the conventional media.[11] Only a minor segment of the mainstream media was able to voice criticism associated with the opposition. Most media outlets helped to distort information and convey the message of successful economic management despite adverse global conditions. For example, inflation was much higher in Turkey than elsewhere, but it was portrayed as a worldwide problem, not unique to Turkey. In addition, a common explanation of currency instability was the interference of foreign agents, notably the US, again shifting responsibility

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[11] For an in-depth assessment of the increasing "press-party parallelism" in Turkey under the AKP rule, see Yıldırım, Baruh, Çarkoğlu (2021). In a systematic empirical assessment based on individual-level data collected in 2018, Yagci and Oyvat (2020: 6) found that "progovernment media viewers are more likely to assess the national economy favourably compared to their own pocketbook."

from the domestic to the international domain. A typical argument was that inflation was a problem, but the government was not responsible, thus suggesting global factors, not the government's poor economic decisions, were responsible for high inflation, and the government was doing its best to bring it under control. The perceptions of citizens are profoundly shaped by the information environment within which they are immersed. Those who criticised government policies, such as keeping interest rates artificially low, or who questioned the accuracy of official macroeconomic data were often intimidated and even threatened with prosecution. The same mechanism drove the earthquake discourse. Through the media, the government conveyed that the earthquake was the worst natural disaster of the century, and the losses incurred were beyond human intervention — drawing attention away from the underlying governance failures.

Beyond Economy: Bounded Communities and the Leadership Dimension

The exit-voice-loyalty equilibrium is also informed by identity-related factors, which were likely to tilt the balance in favour of loyalty. Turkey is a profoundly polarised country (Somer 2019; Aydın-Düzgit and Balta 2019; Erdoğan and Semerci 2018). The presence of deep-seated cultural cleavages in Turkish politics, framed as "bounded communities" (Öniş 2015, 2023) or *kulturkampf* (Kalaycıoğlu 2011; 2021), limits the impact of objective economic factors, such as the dislocating effects of an ongoing economic shock on electoral behaviour. We argue the "bounded communities" argument, when interpreted in a nuanced way, can explain Erdoğan's ability to gain an edge over his rivals in the May 2023 elections. As we see it, identity-related factors in a deeply polarized nation operated in combination with subtle but more immediate concerns related to perceived material benefits and social status, both of which generated loyalty.

As Hirschman (1970: 78-79) cogently underlines, loyalty is "profoundly" different from "faith" in that "in comparison to that act of pure faith, the most loyalist behaviour retains an enormous dose of reasoned calculation." Loyalty is also a function of past performance rather than a photographic analysis of the present situation. Again, in the words of Hirschman (1970: 91), "Demand is of course always likely to be a function not only of current but to some extent also of previous quality because of inertia and lags in perception." This means the shadow of history looms over the current performance legitimacy of the incumbent, especially in contexts where the opposition fails to develop a compelling counter-narrative. As explained above, conservative segments of Turkish society have benefited from AKP rule, enjoying a marked improvement in their economic, social, and political status. As a result, informed by the AKP's earlier performance legitimacy, they have developed a strong attachment to their leader. Hence, even amidst economic disturbance, the electoral threshold for the AKP did not fall below 35 per cent, a higher figure than the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), could ever generate.

In May 2023, the logic of bounded communities and a leadership cult operated in an interactive way to determine the outcome of a closely fought contest. In the domestic sphere, Erdoğan's leadership style and political astuteness helped swing the pendulum in his direction at a difficult moment in two critical respects. The first was his ability to forge effective coalitions. In the lead-up to the elections, he added new dimensions to his governing coalition, notably ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious conservative segments. This allowed him to pass the 50 per cent threshold even though AKP itself was declining. The second was his ability to fragment and discredit the opposition through "agenda shifting." Based on a population-based survey experiment, Aytaç (2021: 1517) found that "when the incumbent highlighted the security challenges Turkey has been facing and downplayed the importance of the economy in our

experiment, respondents perceived the economy as less important and reported higher approval of the government's economic policies." This seemed to be at work in the 2023 elections, too. Erdoğan used harsh and divisive language and framed the opposition block as a national security problem. A striking example was the association of Kılıçdaroğlu with the PKK. In fact, although Kılıçdaroğlu wanted to reach Kurdish constituencies, he was clearly critical of the PKK as a terrorist organisation. Yet most ordinary voters had a different image of Kılıçdaroğlu because of Erdoğan's manipulation of the public information space. In a larger sense, this manipulation points to the decline of ethical standards in competitive authoritarianism.

Beyond these factors, Erdoğan expanded the narrative debate to the foreign policy realm to fragment and paralyze the opposition block. In this sense, a series of concerted efforts by the media and state institutions to position Erdoğan as a "global leader" of a "strong and independent Turkey" helped contain the discontent of the pro-government voters. We explore this dimension in the next section.

International Context: Domestic Politics-Foreign Policy Linkages

It is often claimed that foreign policy plays a residual role in shaping political preferences, as more immediate and proximate domestic concerns dominate the electoral landscape (for a review, see Aldrich et al. 2006). However, the subtle interactions between domestic politics and foreign policy can be instrumental in generating and promoting loyalty for the incumbent. In the Turkish case, Erdoğan is well known for his astuteness in exploiting the "populist dividend" in foreign policy to gain an additional political edge in domestic politics (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). The May 2023 elections were no exception.

The foreign policy developments in the run-up to the elections and the way Erdoğan narrated them on the domestic front —with the assistance of the pro-government media— informed the exit-loyalty balance in the eyes of the electorate. Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy has been the operating logic in Turkish foreign policy in recent years. The basic idea is that Turkey will continue a transactional relationship with the West whilst deepening its economic, diplomatic, and security ties with the non-Western world in a post-Western international order. Turkey has positioned itself as a BRICS-like country, playing a more active role in the global South but formally embedded in Western institutions. Accordingly, Turkish foreign policy has become more assertive and has acquired an important militaristic dimension. Turkish-made drones joined the fight against the PKK, extending these efforts beyond the country's borders to the inner regions of Syria. They have also been effective in the initial phase of the Russia-Ukraine war, defending Kyiv against Russian aggression, and proved instrumental in tilting the balance in favour of Azerbaijan during its war with Armenia.

Together, these elements have projected a techno-nationalist image of a "strong country" that is no longer dependent on the West for its security and can act independently not just in its immediate neighbourhood but also in more distant locales.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed Erdoğan to bolster this image in the short run and contributed to his electoral fortunes by diverting attention from ongoing economic difficulties at home. In the past year, Turkey has capitalised on its unique position of simultaneously maintaining relations with Russia and Ukraine. Turkey has taken a clear anti-war stance, but its position has been based on active neutrality. This has allowed it to position itself as a mediating actor in the conflict, pushing toward compromise and peace. An important achievement in this context was the formulation of the International Grain Agreement and the shipment of

Ukrainian grain through Turkey to the global South, especially to African countries. Even though the agreement was not renewed when it ended in June 2023, Ankara's contributions have been acknowledged by actors on both sides of the conflict.

In addition, Turkey has remained an important partner for the West, playing a role in the NATO enlargement process precipitated by the Russia-Ukraine War. Turkey, for a long time, opposed the membership bids of Sweden and Finland because these two countries, notably Sweden, were not sensitive to Turkey's security concerns, especially concerns about the terrorist activities of the PKK. The Finnish application was endorsed by Turkey shortly before the May elections, and consent was given for the Swedish membership at the annual NATO meeting in July 2023. Importantly, these independent actions, at a time when anti-Western sentiments were on the rise, generated a handsome populist dividend on the domestic front, helping to bolster the popularity of Erdoğan in the period leading up to the May 2023 elections. Ironically, the opposition reduced the cost of foreign policy oscillations for the government by following the footsteps of Erdoğan, leaving little incentive for pro-government voters to exercise the exit option and vote for the opposition because of foreign policy-related concerns.

Erdoğan's balancing act between Russia and the West since 2022 has also bolstered his international standing and helped to shield malpractice in domestic politics. Stated differently, Erdoğan has used foreign policy to reduce the political-economic cost of authoritarianism for himself. Western actors, increasingly concerned with their security challenges, want to keep Turkey on their side against Russia, so Erdoğan has had considerable space to manoeuvre in domestic politics. In this context, the government capitalised on the idea of a strong and independent Turkey in its propaganda efforts during the run-up to the elections. The "Century of Türkiye" (*Türkiye Yüzyılı*) became the new buzzword, Turkish drones were celebrated, and

new symbols were added. For example, TOGG, Turkey's first indigenous electric car, produced by a national consortium of private firms supported by the state, was projected as emblematic of a new wave of national champions. TOGG started production in October 2022, and cars arrived on the market in March 2023. Another symbol was Turkey's domestically built light aircraft and drone carrier, TCG Anadolu, which was opened to public visits shortly before the elections (Hurriyet Daily News, 2023).

The list of these mega projects could be extended. What is important for our purposes is that the average voter, especially conservatives in Anatolian cities, was much more impressed by the government's projection of national power and prestige than by relative economic deprivation and the rising cost of living that mainly hit the urban poor and middle classes. Stated differently, techno-nationalism became an effective instrument for the government to generate loyalty amidst the narrative battles in the pre-election context. There was, for instance, an interesting public debate in the election cycle on "TOGG versus onions." Whilst the government widely promoted national developmentalism epitomised by the TOGG project, the opposition block focused on the impact of high inflation on the living standards of ordinary people, symbolised by the striking increase in the price of onions. The election results suggest that projections of national pride based on symbols like TOGG resonated more with ordinary voters who were unevenly affected by the economic difficulties, especially in the more conservative segments of Turkish society.

Unity of the Governing Block versus Fragmented Opposition Block

In competitive authoritarian regimes, the cost of exit should be examined as a function of uncertainty. The scope of political-economic uncertainty associated with a possible exit decision among pro-government voters partly depends on how the opposition frames its policies

and whether it offers a genuine alternative vision. In the run-up to the May 2023 elections, the opposition encountered a highly uneven playing field in a predominantly competitive authoritarian environment. As previously mentioned, media information campaigns tilted the balance in the government's favour, and the incumbent drew on state resources. Yet a balanced account must also identify the opposition's strategic mistakes both before and after the election process.

In a country where the culture of compromise is traditionally in short supply, and the experience with coalition governments in the 1970s and the 1990s is often associated in the public mind with severe economic and political instabilities, six opposition parties managed to come together and formed a united opposition block: the Nation Alliance. The leader of the main opposition party (CHP) played a leading role in assembling the Nation Alliance. The CHP is mainly a left-wing party, but the alliance included five parties on the right side of the political spectrum. The most critical was the Good Party (İYİP) led by Meral Akşener. This party broke from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) when the latter formed a coalition with the AKP as part of the People's Alliance. Akşener's vision was moderately conservative and had strong nationalistic overtones. Smaller parties in the Nation Alliance included the Future Party (GP), the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), and the Felicity Party (SP). The GP and DEVA were led by former AKP members Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan. Both had served in key ministerial positions in AKP governments. SP, led by Temel Karamollaoğlu, represented an alternative version of Islamist conservatism. All these parties on the right appealed to moderate religious conservative segments of society and were likely to attract voters away from the ruling coalition. The final member of the Nation Alliance was the Democratic Party (DP) led by Gültekin Uysal.

Both Kılıdaroğlu and Akşener, as leaders of the larger parties, made a gallant effort to bring different ideologies together to overcome the problem of bounded communities, which has historically presented itself along religious (conservative-secular) and ethnic (Turkish-Kurdish) faultlines. For historical and socio-political reasons, the CHP alone could not appeal to conservative voters in much of the country, and its appeal in Kurdish regions was minimal. Hence, forming a strategic alliance with parties on the right of the political spectrum constituted an effort to overcome identity divisions and create a common platform of democratic revival. In comparative terms, the opposition block in Turkey was much more broadly based than its Hungarian counterpart. The Hungarian opposition was made up mainly of left-wing and liberal-leaning groups. The Turkish opposition included parties on the political spectrum's left and right.

The Nation Alliance announced its electoral strategy at the end of March, and Kılıçdaroğlu was endorsed as the presidential candidate. The Alliance orchestrated a vibrant campaign in April and early May using slogans such as "I promise you, Spring will come again" and "Mr. Kemal will stand by his promise." The opposition block, pursuing a "big tent" approach, pledged tolerance and inclusivity to create a country based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Indeed, the Alliance appeared to be doing well, and the results of opinion polls suggested the opposition block might win, albeit by a small margin. If the Alliance had won, this would have been a dramatic change, leading to the possibility of a genuine democratic renewal. From a broader international perspective, an opposition victory would have enormous significance, as it would point towards the possibility of reversing a competitive authoritarian regime purely based on domestic political dynamics, with external actors, such as the US or the EU, playing no significant role. Ultimately, however, the first round was a disappointment for the Alliance. It presented a substantial challenge but was unable to overcome the formidable power of the

governing block and the personal appeal of Erdoğan. Once the results of the first round were available, hopes for the second round largely evaporated.

In retrospect, the opposition's election campaign was plagued by strategic mistakes. First and foremost, the choice of the presidential candidate was heavily criticised. The announcement of the candidate was delayed. Moreover, the conflict over the name of the candidate, leading to the temporary departure of Akşener from the "Round Table," suggested disunity and fragmentation, something Erdoğan exploited in his electoral campaign. Opinion polls suggested Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, could have been a better choice and would have broader appeal. Akşener also pushed in this direction but to no avail. The Lula example in Brazil illustrates the importance of a united opposition rallied around a charismatic leader. Although post-election counterfactual analysis is difficult, we suggest the outcome of the Turkish elections could have been different had an alternative candidate been announced much earlier.

Beyond the role of agency, the Alliance was overly bureaucratic and too procedural in its operations. It put too much emphasis on replacing the presidential system with an alternative form of government under the rubric of a "strengthened parliamentary system." This project was far distant from the concerns of the average voter. In addition, the Alliance's overemphasis on equality among opposition partners and its proposal to grant veto powers to all party leaders as "vice presidents" in the event of a government change raised questions about the capacity of the Alliance to deliver effectively. At a deeper level, profound ideological differences divided the six parties, making cooperation and united action difficult and naturally raising the question of what they would do in government, especially given the previous negative experiences of coalition governments. For example, CHP's left-leaning interventionist, redistribution-based policies were not entirely in sync with the neoliberal, free-market orientation of DEVA.

Moreover, there was a rift between İYİP and CHP on the topic of engagement with Kurdish political constituencies. Whilst CHP leadership favoured closer engagement with the Kurdish actors (but keeping them outside the formal Alliance), Akşener and İYİP were vehemently opposed. These inherent ideological differences and overly bureaucratic architecture became a stumbling block for the Alliance. Erdoğan and the ruling block inevitably capitalised on what appeared to be the underlying disunity and fragmentation of the opposition.

Resilience versus Reversibility: Turkish Experience in a Comparative Perspective

The May 2023 elections in Turkey provide an interesting example of how exit, voice, and loyalty options play out in competitive authoritarian regimes. The wave of right-wing populism led by strongmen is a global phenomenon, and several common elements tend to tie these leaders and their associated regimes together. At the same time, however, domestic contexts matter and significantly influence the evolution of such regimes. The recent elections in four countries, the United States in November 2020, Hungary in April 2022, Brazil in October 2022, and Turkey in May 2023, are particularly telling. The fact that two significant authoritarian populist leaders, Donald Trump (the USA) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), lost their seats suggests a democratic turn is possible under certain assumptions. At the same time, the victories of Orban (Hungary) and Erdoğan (Turkey) imply an exit from authoritarian right-wing populism may become increasingly difficult as these parties prove to be resilient and durable in specific national contexts.

What factors explain the variations between cases? When do exit and voice cease to be plausible strategies for the voters? A comparative analysis of the Turkish case leads to five tentative propositions. The first focuses on the duration of authoritarian political leader and their political party in power. The longer the leader and the party rule, the more difficult it becomes for the

opposition to win elections. As populist leaders win successive elections, the regime will move from a flawed democracy towards competitive authoritarianism, and this, in turn, will considerably reduce the space available for opposition actors to fight the incumbent. Among the world's current right-wing populist leaders, Erdoğan has been the longest-serving, at more than 20 years; Orban is the second in line, having been in office since 2010. An extended period in office allows the entrenchment of clientelistic ties, and significant segments of society will derive varying degrees of economic benefits from their association with patronage networks. As leaders consolidate their power, they dominate the public information space, investing in pro-government media and building the capacity to weaken, fragment, and discredit the opposition (for more on the case of Hungary, for example, see Scheppele 2022).

In the US and Brazilian cases, right-wing populist leaders were in office for a single electoral cycle. It is possible to suggest that if Trump or Bolsonaro had won the second elections, the authoritarian nature of their respective measures would have deepened, making a potential reversal in the future more difficult. This brings us to a second proposition: the more profound the extent of the democratic decline, the more difficult it becomes to reverse it because the cost of voice significantly increases for the voters who dare to challenge the incumbent. Despite the challenges posed by the Trump phenomenon, the US has continued to enjoy liberal democracy in the form of a strong and largely independent judicial system that protects the right to freedom of expression and political protest.[12] To varying degrees, similar characteristics are found in Brazil. In the Brazilian case, whilst powerful interests backed Bolsonaro, he lacked the necessary party machinery —as well as time span— to build well-entrenched clientelistic ties, institutionalise his power base, and pack the courts and media with coteries.

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[12] For a discussion on American political system and the critical role of "gatekeeping" that historically has kept democracy on track, see Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019).

This brings us to our third proposition: a powerful opposition block led by a charismatic leader can overcome the incumbent. The Brazilian case clearly illustrates this; a popular presidential figure from an earlier period was able to challenge Bolsonaro. A less charismatic candidate could have easily lost the elections, as in 2018. In both the Hungarian and Turkish cases, the opposition leaders lacked the charisma or the personal appeal required to unite factions or to challenge the natural charm of the respective leaders, Erdoğan and Orban. Without neglecting the constraining role of institutional structures in competitive authoritarianism, it takes a charismatic leader —as a necessary but not sufficient condition— to reduce political uncertainty, gain voters' trust, and convince them to place their loyalty elsewhere.

Our fourth proposition is that even if opposition to the regime is significant, the chances of removing the authoritarian populist regimes are slim if the opposition parties portray a fragmented image. In Hungary and Turkey, the opposition achieved victories in municipal elections but was unable to defeat the incumbents in subsequent national elections. In their framing of the national elections, the incumbents portrayed the governing block as representing national unity and the opposition as representing disunity and weakness in terms of capacity to govern. This helped to tilt the balance in favour of the incumbents. In contrast, in the American and Brazilian contexts, the strength and unity of the opposition block played a consequential role in the elections.

A final proposition is that even in the American and Brazilian cases, the phenomenon of right-wing populist leaders is not over. In the US case, Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, but the legacy of Trumpism lingers, and he promises to be a threat in the 2024 election. In the Brazilian case, Bolsonaro has been barred from political competition for ten years, but this does not preclude the possibility that a Bolsonaro-type figure may emerge and win the next

presidential race. Hunter and Power (2023: 130), for instance, point out that "the October 2022 elections [in Brazil] arguably saw the strongest overall performance by the political right since the military regime ended almost forty years ago." We should also remember that these two former leaders were not willing to relinquish power, even though they lost their elections — albeit by narrow margins. The Capitol Hill riots engineered by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021, and the Bolsonaro supporters storming the National Congress in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 elections are striking examples.

Conclusion: A New Path or Path Stabilisation?

In this paper, we examined how Erdoğan managed to tilt the equilibrium in his favour in the May 2023 elections. We used Albert O. Hirschman's "exit, voice, and loyalty" framework to demonstrate that loyalty to the incumbent generated considerable benefits for Turkish voters despite accumulating governance failures, depending on the degree and strength of their connections to the government. At the same time, the opposition block failed to reduce voter uncertainty by offering a genuine alternative to the incumbent. In fact, nationalism based on symbols of national unity, grandeur, and strength appeared to have more appeal among the electorate than arguments of justice, pluralism, and peaceful co-existence. The unity of the governing block dominated by a popular presidential figure overrode a sizeable yet ultimately fragmented opposition block.

In this paper, we offered an analytic exercise to develop an integrated framework accounting for the puzzling outcome of the Turkish elections. In this type of ex post facto analysis, trends and patterns are easier to delineate. As Bernstein (1998) aptly points out, "After the fact […] when we study the history of what happened, the source of the wildness appears to be so obvious to us that we have a hard time understanding how people on the scene were oblivious to what

lay in wait for them." In the Turkish case, it is, and arguably will remain, difficult to assign precise weights to the effect of each parameter shaping voter preferences. The interactions of these parameters are complex, and there is no easy way to reverse the current authoritarian turn in Turkish politics —also in global politics, for this matter. At the very least, pro-democratic opposition forces need to develop coherent and comprehensive counter-strategies spearheaded by effective leadership. The Turkish case shows what happens when they fail to do so.

What is the future of Turkish democracy in light of the exit-voice-loyalty calculus? President Erdoğan emerged as the winner and will likely continue to consolidate his position, deepening the authoritarian nature of the regime. When the results of the first round became available, the opposition immediately lost momentum, and the subsequent performance of Kılıçdaroğlu was counterproductive. First, in the interim period before the second round, he tried to capture part of the nationalist vote by adopting a rhetoric based on the promise of deporting all Syrian refugees over a short period. The nature and tone of his speeches sharply contrasted with arguments in previous campaign phases. Second, and even more significantly, he decided to hang onto power after the elections, and this generated deep resentment among the opposition voters. It would have been a much wiser decision to announce his resignation in the post-election phase, opening space for a new candidate to take over and provide a new direction and momentum to CHP and the opposition at large. After the elections, the Nation Alliance collapsed, and the individual parties went their separate ways. Many voters were disgruntled, and those who had exercised the voice option found themselves in difficulty due to the disappointing post-election indifference of the opposition block. This bitter feeling of abandonment leaves "private" exit the more likely option for many voters who supported the opposition block. In this context, especially for young and educated Turks, exit may take two forms in the post-election equilibrium. First, it might involve moving out of the country and

seeking opportunities elsewhere.[13] This form of exit is *silent*, but its long-term consequences are *noisy* because it incurs significant costs for Turkey due to the depleted human capital. This trend, if not reversed, is likely to exacerbate the scale of the brain drain the country has already been experiencing. In the end, individuals will choose to exit if they think "the cost of using voice" or their "exit payoff […] is sufficiently large" (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2017: 725). Similar logic applies to large capital holders. Second, we may see increasing de-politicisation and a retreat to the private sphere as another form of exit for opposition groups. Under this scenario, as laid out in the first part of the paper, exit may undermine voice. In our view, this is a likely development that will have adverse implications for Turkish democracy. If voters, especially intellectuals, well-educated middle classes, and younger segments of society, start believing "they have nowhere to go" and the incumbent is the only option, this will shore up the regime's resilience despite apparent governance failures.

An important question in this context is whether the government will embark on a new path to address Turkey's multiple governance crises. Certain signs signal a possible change in this regard. On the economic front, the new Erdoğan government has made some policy adjustments, and the economic crisis will likely be contained before it reaches higher proportions. Yet the new set of policies is likely to have significant negative consequences for income distribution by undermining the position of wage earners. One of Erdoğan's early moves in his new term has been to appoint people with substantial connections to Western financial circles to critical economic posts. Mehmet Şimşek, a former Finance Minister, was appointed Minister of Economy, and Hafize Gaye Erkan was appointed Governor of the Central Bank.

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[13] This form of exit is "silent" and "private". It is, in fact, a "private good in that it cannot be had through the exertions of others, as a result of some sort of free ride" (Hirschman 1993: 194).

On the foreign policy front, some steps suggest a desire to improve relations with key Western actors, albeit on a narrow transactional basis. The most recent decision in this context has been to endorse Sweden's NATO membership. However, we suggest these policy adjustments should be considered as *path stabilisation*; as such, they are unlikely to change the direction of state-market relations in the Turkish political economy or the transactionalist nature of Turkish foreign policy based on the notion of strategic autonomy. Western actors also seem to accept this narrow transactional pattern. The previous rhetoric, with its references to democracy and human rights, appears to have been relegated to the backseat, opening up more space for the governing coalition in the domestic sphere. Given the current domestic and international dynamics, the emergence of a new path is unlikely unless opposition parties engage in processes of moral soul-searching, intellectual restoration, and institutional reform to give a new life to "the art of voice" in Turkish politics.

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