

Erdogan destroys his own initiative

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On March 19, 2025, Turkish authorities detained the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP). This event was perceived extremely negatively in Turkish society and being confident that Recep Tayyip Erdogan was thereby seeking to neutralize his main rival in the future presidential elections, the Turkish politicized public came out to mass anti-government rallies. The Turkish stock markets and the lira exchange rate, which had fallen to unprecedented lows, also reacted negatively to the arrest of E. Imamoglu. In fact, the ongoing political crisis in Turkey has been triggered by the actions of the authorities themselves.

According to Turkish media outlets, the Istanbul prosecutor's office accuses E. Imamoglu and dozens of his associates on several counts, including document forgery, corruption, orchestrating a criminal organization and providing support to terrorism activities. In particular, we are talking, allegedly, about the mayor of Istanbul providing assistance to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is recognized as a terrorist organization in Turkey, the USA and the EU.

According to a number of experts, the long list of charges brought against Imamoglu and his entourage is intended to confuse the future trial and stretch it out as much as possible in time, in order to prevent the opposition CHP from nominating E. Imamoglu in the presidential elections, as the latest preliminary surveys indicate that the Istanbul mayor possesses unprecedentedly high electoral prospects.

The current assumption about the reasons for the various indictments is quite convincing, since the Turkish prosecutor's office under the patronage of R. Erdogan since the early 2000s, has developed extensive experience in neutralizing political opponents of the authorities by incriminating them with numerous crimes and subsequently delaying investigative and judicial procedures for extended periods. In this context, the nature of the charges brought against Imamoglu is also “logical”: corruption, bribery, kickbacks, fraud on dozens of cases. According to the plan of the Turkish authorities, the very fact of an investigation with such charges should have a negative impact on E. Imamoglu’s image. The ongoing financial and economic crisis has rendered the Turkish society extremely sensitive to social issues, so the attempt to tie the sharp deterioration of the living conditions in Turkey with the “corrupt” methods of governance of the opposition in the municipalities under its control appears to coincide with the central authorities’ desire to get rid of their own responsibility for failures in the social and economic sphere.

As for the accusations of complicity in “*Kurdish terrorism*”, in this regard, the classic method of denigrating political opponents has been launched, practiced by all ruling parties in Turkey without exception since the 1930s. The problem of the so-called “*Kurdish separatism*” is an extremely sensitive topic on Turkey’s domestic political agenda, and playing this card has long been an integral element of the competition for power in the country. R. Erdogan and his party (the Justice and Development Party) also did not abandon this “resource” in the political struggle, as it is proved by numerous trials of opponents during the 25-year period of the AKP rule. The “*Kurdish card*” also became a determining

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.03.2025.

factor for R. Erdogan in his competition with the main opposition force at the moment – the CHP, which enjoys significant support from the Kurdish electorate of Turkey. R. Erdogan has always accused the CHP of having ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (which is declared a terrorist organization) and its military wing, and therefore the inclusion of the clause of aiding terrorism in the list of the charges brought against E. Imamoglu is not something exceptional.

However, on the other hand, in light of the recent internal political developments in Turkey, another precedent for playing the “Kurdish card” gives rise to a number of questions. We are talking about the comprehensive and final resolution to the Kurdish problem in the country on the principles of justice, equality and peace, declared by the current Turkish authorities and the AKP satellites. In this regard, there is a perception that by retouching upon the “Kurdish problem” in a negative way, the official Ankara is jeopardizing its own initiative, which, according to optimistic Turkish politicians, could become an epoch-making event in the history of the republic.

Let us note that the Turkish authorities in their rhetoric do not equate the PKK with the “*Kurdish population*” in general, on the contrary, they try hard to demonstrate a differentiated attitude towards the “*peaceful Kurds*” and the “*Kurdish guerrillas*”. From this point of view, the charging of Imamoglu with alleged support for the PKK does not formally contradict the declared policy of creating a platform of peace and mutual understanding between the Turkish government and the Kurds. Ankara has repeatedly stated that it sees the PKK outside this platform and is not ready to accept this party as a dialogue partner unless the latter completely and unconditionally lays down its arms. Conversely, R. Erdogan cannot help but understand that accusing E. Imamoglu of complicity in “*Kurdish terrorists*” he himself revitalizes the “Kurdish problem” in all its manifestations and destroys the favorable socio-political climate for the “*epochal reconciliation*” that he has been trying to create over the past few months.

Mentioning the PKK as “*Kurdish terrorists*” in the Imamoglu case constitutes a direct affront to the moderate Kurdish political circles that form the cornerstone of the CHP party and comprise a substantial portion of its potential electorate. R. Erdogan, seeking to devalue the image of E. Imamoglu, undermining his personal election potential, could “recommend” the prosecutor's office not to touch on Kurdish issues, but limit itself to the “*corruption*” component of the activities of the Istanbul mayor. However, for some reason, the price of the political destruction of the main rival of the current head of Turkey was the resuscitation of Turkish-Kurdish contradictions and Ankara's actual blow to the peace platform built through its own efforts.

Thus, R. Erdogan, who refused to eliminate the “sharp corners” in the case of E. Imamoglu showed that Turkey, in fact, is far from the optimal solution to its “*Kurdish problem*”. This phenomenon may be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, the positions of the ruling party are deemed to be significantly weakened, and in order to politically neutralize E. Imamoglu, the head of the Turkish state is forced to rely on the radicalization of nationalist sentiments within the ethnic Turkish environment through the conventional exploitation of the “Kurdish card”. Secondly, the Turkish authorities have concluded that the initiative of the Turkish-Kurdish reconciliation platform has failed, and their reliance on the authority of Abdullah Ocalan, who was expected to distinguish between the “*peaceful Kurds*” and the “*terrorist PKK*”, has proven to be anachronistic and ineffective.