

# SWP Comment

NO. 14 MARCH 2026

## Turkey's "Year of the Family" 2025

Authoritarian Trends and Political Economy of Anti-Gender Politics

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The Turkish government's declaration of 2025 as the "Year of the Family" reflects an increasingly authoritarian approach to managing demographic decline amid conditions of economic strain. Falling fertility rates are framed as a strategic challenge to national resilience, giving rise to a policy agenda that positions the family as the cornerstone of demographic recovery. At the same time, anti-gender politics has moved beyond ideological rhetoric towards a broader governance strategy linking demographic management, fiscal constraints, and authoritarian consolidation. For Germany and the European Union (EU), understanding these developments is essential for engaging Turkey on democratic governance, social policy, and gender equality.

The declaration of 2025 as the "Year of the Family" and the announcement of 2026 – 2035 as the "Decade of Family and Population" reflect the growing centrality of demographic governance in Turkey's social policy. Both initiatives are grounded in an official narrative that frames declining fertility rates and demographic slowdown as threats to economic stability, labour-force sustainability, national resilience, and state capacity. In response, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has called for national mobilisation around the preservation of the traditional family structure as the primary site for demographic recovery, presenting childbearing as a civic duty.

### Demography as a gender governance strategy

Official discourse in Turkey attributes declining fertility rates to cultural transformation, rising individualism, and allegedly imported "Western gender" ideologies, while downplaying structural socio-economic pressures and broader processes of social modernisation. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has linked gender equality and LGBTQ+ advocacy to earlier family-planning policies, such as legal abortion and contraception, portraying them as ideologically driven interventions that have weakened the nation's demographic foundations. Declining birth rates are thus treated as a strategic threat, prompting the AKP government to launch a decade-long population agenda that places demography



at the centre of social policy governance. Policy responses emphasise the defence of family values and social cohesion, while leaving structural factors such as job insecurity, housing costs, and childcare provision largely unaddressed.

This orientation is reflected in a range of policy instruments. Expanded childbirth payments, marriage-linked credits, and the Family and Youth Fund are intended to incentivise childbearing, while newly established bodies, including the Population Policies Board and the Family Institute, coordinate demographic policy across ministries. The composition of these institutions — including the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Directorate of Communications, and the Turkish Statistical Institute — points to the cross-governmental embedding of demographic governance. Public messaging promotes motherhood, childbearing, and the “natural” gender complementarity within a heteronormative family model, while state authorities simultaneously stigmatise LGBTQ+ individuals as socially undesirable. This stigmatisation is reinforced at both the societal and political levels by senior officials, including the Minister of Family and Social Services, Mahinur Özdemir Göktaş, who portrayed the LGBTQ+ movement as part of a global campaign of “desexualisation” and other “harmful movements” said to threaten traditional family values. At the same time, investigations and prosecutions targeting LGBTQ+ activists have increased in recent years, illustrating how exclusionary rhetoric is translated into institutional pressure.

The family has long been a central element of the AKP leadership’s rhetoric, but what distinguishes the current debate is the transformation of family policy into a broader governance framework. Fertility, once treated primarily as a social issue, is increasingly framed as a matter of national resilience and security. Demographic data provide the background to this shift. Turkey’s annual population growth rate — defined as the number of people added per 1,000 population between two census dates

— fluctuated between approximately 12 and 14.7 per 1,000 from 2008 to 2019, before falling sharply to 5.5 in 2020. Despite a temporary rebound to 12.7 in 2021, subsequent years again recorded historically low levels, while fertility rates fell well below replacement level.

Demographic slowdown, however, is not unique to Turkey. Globally, fertility rates have declined dramatically, including across the EU, and many countries are dealing with ageing populations and shrinking workforces, even if the political interpretations of these trends differ. Empirical research suggests that declining fertility in Turkey is closely associated with structural socio-economic factors such as urbanisation, job insecurity, and rising unemployment. Persistently high inflation has eroded purchasing power, while soaring housing costs have made family formation and child-rearing increasingly expensive. Expectations regarding future living conditions and household finances have also deteriorated markedly over the past two decades, particularly among younger cohorts. In 2023, 21.6 per cent of individuals aged 18 to 24 and 27.5 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 expected overall living conditions to deteriorate. Under these conditions, many young people — especially women — prioritise education and participation in the labour market, delaying family formation and childbearing. Yet the Turkish government interprets this demographic trend differently.

Concern about demographic change is not inherently authoritarian. What makes Turkey’s current trajectory authoritarian is the political reframing of population decline as a civilisational and moral threat rather than the outcome of structural socio-economic conditions. This shift redirects policy away from welfare redistribution and towards normative regulation. Instead of expanding childcare provision, labour protections, and housing support, the state is increasingly intervening in family and private sphere through symbolic politics and identity-based exclusions. In this context, authoritarian anti-gender rhetoric

serves several political functions: It identifies internal and external adversaries, consolidates the conservative political base, and re-centres the heteronormative family as the sole “legitimate” unit of national reproduction.

## **Fiscal constraints and family-centred governance in Turkey**

The demographic agenda outlined above also has an important fiscal dimension, as it unfolds in a context of constrained public finances and limited capacity for expanding social policy. Since the economic instability of 2018, macroeconomic volatility has narrowed fiscal space and reinforced pressure to limit long-term social-policy commitments. The situation has intensified since 2021, when “unorthodox economic policies” – centred on lowering interest rates despite high inflation – further destabilised the currency and intensified fiscal strain on the welfare state.

Social policies, including gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence, are institutionally anchored in the budget of the Ministry of Family and Social Services. International frameworks such as UN Women’s Gender-Responsive Budgeting emphasise that gender equality considerations should be integrated throughout the budgetary cycle and across policy sectors. The Council of Europe guidelines and the European Commission’s Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030 similarly stress that all policy areas should be assessed for their gendered impact and that gender equality should be integrated “into every aspect of life”. Recent budgetary practice in Turkey, however, points in the opposite direction. Despite the government’s rhetorical emphasis on the family – accompanied by pro-natalist funds and incentives – fiscal tightening since 2018 has constrained public spending, while the budget share allocated to the ministry responsible for family and social services has remained modest.

Regardless of this rhetoric, the institutional design of gender governance in Tur-

key reveals a clear hierarchy of priorities. Rather than establishing an autonomous ministry for women’s rights or gender equality, successive governments have embedded these policy areas within family-centred institutions. Since 2011, issues such as gender equality, violence against women, and women’s empowerment have been administered under the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, later renamed the Ministry of Family and Social Services. Even after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and despite the sustained advocacy by women’s movements for an autonomous institutional framework, AKP governments have maintained this arrangement. The adoption of Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and the Prevention of Violence Against Women further reinforced this framing by conceptually linking women’s rights to the preservation of family. As a result, women’s rights policy is not treated as an independent, equality-based domain, but is addressed primarily through the lens of family protection and social harmony.

Within this institutional framework, spending on gender equality remains embedded in broader family and social-policy expenditures. The Ministry of Family and Social Services received a budget allocation of approximately 2.5 per cent of the central government budget, rising to a peak of 4.3 per cent in 2016. In 2019, amid mounting fiscal pressure, the ministry was merged with the Ministry of Labour to form the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services. This move temporarily increased the aggregate budget share to above 10 per cent due to the incorporation of labour and social security expenditures rather than additional resources for gender equality or violence prevention. After the ministries were separated in 2021, and again in 2022, the budget share returned to around 3 to 3.5 per cent, before declining further to 2.8 per cent in the 2025 budget. In proportional terms, the ministry responsible for family and social policy now operates with fewer resources than at its peak in the mid-2010s.

The trajectory reflects two structurally connected priorities. First, care work is increasingly framed as a family responsibility rather than a publicly provided service. Policy initiatives therefore prioritise “family-centred care” models over the expansion of childcare infrastructure, professional eldercare services, and disability support systems that would enable women’s stable participation in the labour market. In practice, care work remains firmly located within the household and is carried out primarily by women, with limited financial transfers providing short-term relief rather than substituting for comprehensive public services. By relying on modest home-care payments rather than expanding public care infrastructure, the state effectively reproduces women’s role as unpaid or semi-paid care providers in the private sphere.

Second, institutional capacity in the fields of gender equality and violence prevention has not expanded in line with rising demand. Effective prevention of gender-based violence requires adequately staffed Violence Prevention and Monitoring Centres (Şiddet Önleme ve İzleme Merkezleri, ŞÖNİM), the training of social workers, specialised law enforcement units, and sustained inter-ministerial coordination. These mechanisms require long-term institutional and financial commitments, yet available institutional resources remain insufficient relative to need.

Taken together, this trajectory reveals a structural pattern in which the family is positioned as the cornerstone of national continuity. At the same time, fiscal commitment to gender equality, violence prevention, and public care infrastructure remains limited. This arrangement is justified through a normative commitment to family values, the moral role of motherhood, the demonisation of LGBTQ+ communities, and the natural complementarity of women and men, rather than being presented as a reduction of public provision. Demographic concerns thus become a political resource: Declining fertility rates are framed as a civilisational threat, while demands for gender equality are depicted as destabilising

Western influences. In this configuration, families are expected to absorb social risks, shoulder the burden of caregiving, and manage violence within the private sphere. Women are consequently confronted with a stark choice: either to engage in precarious employment without adequate public care infrastructure, or to assume the heavy burden of unpaid or only partially supported domestic care work alongside expectations of higher fertility.

### **Anti-gender politics as an authoritarian strategy**

In the context of demographic decline and limited public spending on gender equality, anti-gender politics has emerged over the last decade as a parallel strategy of authoritarian governance alongside the promotion of the family. Moving beyond political rhetoric, anti-gender discourse has been systematically mainstreamed through multiple institutional channels across the state and society. Two interrelated mechanisms have been particularly important in this process. First, Turkey’s withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence – commonly known as the Istanbul Convention – marked a deliberate distancing from binding international commitments that require sustained institutional and financial investment in the prevention of gender-based violence. Second, anti-gender narratives have been actively disseminated through religious institutions, the education system, media outlets, and government-affiliated civil society organisations. Through these channels, anti-gender politics functions both as ideological positioning and as a mechanism for restructuring social policy, public discourse, and the boundaries of legitimate citizenship.

Turkey’s departure from the Istanbul Convention clearly illustrates this shift. In March 2021, President Erdoğan issued a decree ending Turkey’s participation in the Convention, which sets standards for pre-

venting violence against women, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators. Government representatives argued that women's rights were already sufficiently protected under national legislation and that international legal commitments were therefore unnecessary. At the same time, official statements and Islamist-conservative groups increasingly claimed that the Convention promoted "gender ideology" and "normalised homosexuality", presenting it as incompatible with national family values. The move is particularly notable because Turkey had been the first country to ratify the Convention in 2011 and later the first to withdraw from it. The decision thus signalled a broader political realignment within the government's emerging anti-gender agenda.

A comparative perspective situates these developments within a broader European context. Across parts of Central and Eastern Europe, demographic ageing and declining fertility rates have likewise been politicised. Several EU member states have resisted or delayed ratifying the Istanbul Convention – often framing it as incompatible with national values and norms – including Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, restrictive abortion policies and hostility towards LGBTQ+ rights have reinforced broader anti-gender agendas, while debates in Latvia signal ongoing resistance to international gender-equality norms. These developments indicate that anti-gender politics forms part of a transnational repertoire through which demographic concerns, cultural anxieties, and sovereignty claims are articulated. In Turkey, however, these dynamics are more tightly embedded in a broader governance framework characterised by the alignment of state institutions, the systematic narrowing of civic space, and the integration of demographic policy into a wider strategy of political control.

The second mechanism operates through the mainstreaming of anti-gender discourse across several institutional and societal arenas, most notably religious institutions, education, media, and civil society. Among

these, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) plays a central role. Through officially disseminated Friday sermons, the institution portrays the family as the "sacred foundation of social order" and national continuity, while emphasising women's roles as "mothers" and "care-givers" and presenting girls as obedient. The head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs has repeatedly expressed his anger and concern about the erosion of the traditional gender hierarchy, arguing that the balance between male and female roles has been disrupted. Within this interpretative framework, gender equality norms and LGBTQ+ visibility are often presented as externally driven agendas deemed incompatible with national and religious values.

This discursive role is also supported by stable public funding. Since 2010, the Diyanet's budget has consistently accounted for 0.8 to 1.2 per cent of total public expenditure – a substantial share relative to that of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, which receives only around 2.5 to 4 per cent of the central budget. The formal cooperation protocols between the Diyanet and the Ministry of Family and Social Services further institutionalise this approach by integrating religious guidance into family policy and the delivery of social services. Religious authority thus becomes an instrument for legitimising a family-centred model of social reproduction, in which care responsibilities are predominantly privatised as well as embedded within the household.

Education constitutes another channel through which family-centred gender norms and anti-gender narratives are reproduced. Analyses of history and social studies textbooks point to the persistent reinforcement of traditional gender roles through civic education. Women are frequently associated with motherhood and domestic responsibilities, while citizenship and public participation are implicitly framed as male domains. Despite the formal acknowledgement of equality, women continue to be represented primarily in the private sphere. By contrast, structural

inequalities, including girls' access to education, receive comparatively limited policy attention. Recent monitoring reports estimate that approximately 222,000 girls remain outside the education system, with poverty, household responsibilities, and early marriage playing a major role. These findings suggest that education policy functions less as a vehicle for advancing gender equality than as a mechanism for reproducing family-centred gender norms.

Media constitute another key channel for the dissemination of anti-gender discourse. State-owned broadcasters, pro-government television channels, and newspapers frequently present the heterosexual family as the “natural” and “legitimate” foundation of social order, presenting motherhood and gender complementarity as socially desirable norms. By contrast, LGBTQ+ communities are often depicted in stigmatising and derogatory terms in outlets such as *Yeni Akit*, where they are portrayed as a threat to moral order and demographic continuity. Alongside this discursive framing, the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations in mainstream media has narrowed, while comparatively less-regulated digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram have also come under growing monitoring and regulatory pressure. Official statements and public campaigns frame these measures as necessary efforts to protect society from “deviant” or “harmful” influences. Media regulation and discursive production thus operate in tandem: While pro-government outlets actively promote family-centred narratives, restrictions on visibility narrow the space in which alternative understandings of gender and sexuality can be articulated. Through this dual process of promotion and exclusion, anti-gender ideology becomes embedded in both everyday communication and public debate.

At the same time, advocacy groups working on gender equality and violence prevention increasingly face legal pressures and public delegitimisation, which limits their operational capacity. Meanwhile, the AKP government supports selected civil society actors that reinforce its anti-gender politics.

Organisations such as Turkey Gençlik Vakfı (TÜGVA), Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), and Turkish Family Assemblies operate within this environment and contribute to policy discussions on family and gender issues, yet their activities remain closely aligned with official priorities. They thus function in a more controlled and less autonomous civic space. Rather than eliminating civil society altogether, the state selectively structures participation within it, promoting actors that reinforce family-centred policy agendas while constraining more critical voices. This reflects a broader shift from pluralistic engagement with civil society towards a more controlled model of participation.

### **The political economy of authoritarian gender governance**

The “Year of the Family” in 2025 and the subsequent decade-long demographic agenda reflect a broader reconfiguration of authoritarian governance under conditions of economic constraint. Since the economic downturn of 2018, compounded by the global fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey’s already limited fiscal capacity has further narrowed the scope for public spending on social policy, while declining fertility rates have been framed as a strategic concern. Within this context, the government has prioritised short-term measures and shifted responsibilities to families, while mainstreaming an anti-gender agenda through religious, educational, media, and civil society channels and combining this with the normative promotion of the family as a broader mode of governance.

Limited public investment in social protection is reflected in the insufficient capacity to prevent violence against women, as institutional mechanisms have not expanded in proportion to need. According to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, at least 294 women were killed by men in 2025 and 297 women died under suspicious circumstances, continuing a pattern ob-

served since Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Institutional protection mechanisms have not expanded in proportion to the scale of the problem, reinforcing the gap between symbolic family-centred discourse and implementation capacity in practice.

At the same time, economic constraints continue to shape demographic behaviour. Rising living costs and economic uncertainty limit household formation, while government incentives remain modest and largely credit-based, offering temporary support rather than providing long-term solutions. Taken together, these dynamics point to a broader political economy of governance: limited fiscal capacity, the absence of gender-responsive budgeting, and strained public finances shift welfare responsibilities onto households, particularly women.

This re-familiarisation of social policy is accompanied by an authoritarian restructuring of gender governance in which the family is positioned as the primary site for managing social risks, while gender equality and violence prevention are increasingly confined to the private sphere.

Anti-gender politics in Turkey thus functions as a governing strategy linking demographic anxiety, fiscal constraints, and authoritarian consolidation. These dynamics not only shape domestic governance but also define the context in which external actors engage with Turkey. They therefore have direct implications for EU–Turkey relations.

## Implications and recommendations

The designation of 2025 as the “Year of the Family” illustrates how demographic concerns and fiscal constraints have become embedded in Turkey's evolving authoritarian governance model. Anti-gender politics therefore functions not only as ideological rhetoric but also as a policy framework through which social responsibilities are increasingly shifted to households and the moral authority of the family is elevated.

For German and European policymakers, recognising these political and economic dynamics is essential to understanding the broader trajectory of state–society relations in Turkey and the changing foundations of social policy governance. This, in turn, has direct implications for EU–Turkey relations and for the EU's engagement with Turkey as a candidate country.

*Link gender equality to accession and rule-of-law dialogue:* EU engagement that treats gender policy primarily as a normative issue risks overlooking its role within a broader governance strategy. In Turkey, gender and family policies are closely linked to demographic management and fiscal constraints. As an EU candidate country, Turkey remains formally committed to aligning its legislation and institutional framework with EU standards, including those related to gender equality and fundamental rights. European actors should therefore integrate gender equality more substantially into accession and rule-of-law dialogue, in line with the objectives of the EU Gender Equality Strategy.

*Strengthen support for civil society resilience:* As anti-gender politics narrows the space for independent advocacy, support for civil society actors working on gender equality and violence prevention requires recalibration. In an increasingly restrictive environment, short-term, project-based funding is no longer sufficient. Germany and the EU should prioritise long-term institutional partnerships, research cooperation, and support for regional networks that strengthen organisational resilience, sustain expertise, and preserve channels for policy engagement.

*Use social policy and care infrastructure as entry points for engagement:* Given that demographic decline is a central concern for the Turkish government, cooperation on social policy and care infrastructure offers pragmatic entry points for engagement. EU–Turkey cooperation on childcare provision, labour-market participation, and social services can address the structural drivers of demographic change while indirectly supporting gender equality objectives. Engage-

ment at the municipal level may provide opportunities for cooperation that are less exposed to political constraints at the national level.

Understanding the interaction between demographic governance, fiscal constraints, and anti-gender politics is crucial for formulating informed European policy responses. Embedding gender equality in broader discussions of democratic governance and social policy remains essential for maintaining meaningful and principled engagement with Turkey.



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ISSN (Print) 1861-1761  
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107  
DOI: 10.18449/2026C14

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The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office.

SWP Comment 14  
March 2026

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