

Turkish CHP leader Özel's *Newsweek* article: How to fight for democratic rights and against imperialism

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Özgür Özel, the elected leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), published an article on June 1 in the American *Newsweek* magazine, addressing the political crisis in Türkiye. The piece is directed at Türkiye's imperialist NATO and European Union (EU) allies, framing the government's pressure on the CHP as a security threat to the imperialists.

Özel warns that the obstruction of what he terms a "peaceful democratic means to change" under CHP leadership by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government will plunge the country into instability—to the detriment of NATO and the EU.

By implying that the CHP is capable of containing the mounting social opposition to the Erdoğan government, Özel seeks to win over NATO and EU powers—and in doing so, lays bare the CHP's class character and its organic ties to imperialism.

The forces to which Özel is appealing are either backing or directly waging Israel's genocide in Gaza and its war on Lebanon, the ongoing US-Israeli war against Iran, and NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine. The most naked expression of their fraudulent claim to be "defenders of democracy" is the fact that US President Donald Trump is constructing a presidential dictatorship that has effectively abolished the Constitution. In both the United States and Europe, the unprecedented erosion of democratic rights is accompanied by savage social cuts and austerity. This is the same program being implemented by Erdoğan—that of the financial oligarchy, pursued on an international scale.

Özel wrote this piece at the peak of the mounting government-driven assault on the CHP. On May 21, a regional court in Ankara issued a ruling of "absolute nullity" against the 38th Ordinary Congress of 2023 and the 21st Extraordinary Congress of 2025, ousting the current leadership and reinstating former party chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The ruling was a nakedly political act, entirely without legal foundation, issued under government pressure.

The judicial operation was set in motion after the CHP emerged as the country's leading party in the March 31, 2024 local elections, winning more than 17 million votes. It intensified following the appointment of Akın Gürlek—later named justice minister—as Istanbul's chief public prosecutor, after which a campaign of arrests targeting the CHP's elected mayors was launched. The CHP's presidential candidate and Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, who had begun polling ahead of Erdoğan, was among the many elected mayors arrested.

The Sosyalist Eşitlik Partisi – Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party –Fourth International) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) opposed the political arrests, the judicial removal of the CHP's elected leadership, and the broader assault on democratic rights. It did so, however, while making its irreconcilable political differences with the CHP explicit, and while opposing the various "left" parties that uncritically lined up behind Özel's leadership in the face of government

pressure. Özel's article, addressed to the imperialists, confirms the correctness of that assessment.

The collapse of Türkiye's fragile democracy

In his article, Özel argues that the Erdoğan government has seized control of most of the state apparatus and is working to eliminate "the last meaningful democratic alternative." Yet he is unable to explain why this is happening; his sole stated reason is that the CHP came first in the 2024 elections.

Attacks on democratic rights, however, are an international phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the ambitions of one-man. The WSWS wrote:

What is unfolding in Türkiye is not a purely national event but a manifestation of an international collapse of democratic forms of rule rooted in the deepening crisis of the capitalist system. US President Donald Trump, having lost the November 2020 elections, mounted a failed coup on January 6, 2021, seeking to remain in power illegally. Erdoğan, for his part, is attempting to forestall a likely defeat in the next elections by neutralizing his principal rival.

The authoritarianism of governments is not a subjective choice by individual rulers; it is the product of the objective contradictions of capitalism. The escalating imperialist wars and aggression across the Middle East and around the world, alongside unprecedented levels of social inequality and class tension, are manifestations of this.

In Türkiye, the ruling class is sitting atop a social powder keg. Türkiye ranks among the most unequal societies in Europe, and the polarization between the working class and the bourgeoisie has reached extraordinary dimensions.

Since 2018, annual inflation has exceeded 100 percent—and remains officially at 32 percent. The Turkish Lira has shed most of its value against the dollar, causing the prices of imported goods to skyrocket. Food inflation has struck hardest in working-class neighborhoods, among agricultural laborers and the urban poor. Real wages have fallen sharply over the same period, while the rate of informal employment remains above 40 percent. The assault on workers' conditions of labor and life is meeting growing resistance, as the struggle of the Doruk Mining workers has made plain. This is the objective foundation of the Erdoğan

government's escalating repression: the ruling class can no longer govern—even in the most limited sense—through democratic channels.

The court ruling did not merely remove Özel from leadership. It also brought the political divisions within the CHP into the open. As documented by the WSWS, K?l?çdarolu—who led the CHP from 2010 to 2023 and worked alongside Özel for years—was not a passive spectator during the judicial operation; he was a critical accomplice. The WSWS wrote that the judicial coup “that has installed Kemal K?l?çdarolu—who has assumed the role of ‘His Majesty’s loyal opposition’—amounts to a declaration that, amid explosive class and international tensions, even the mildest political opposition will not be tolerated,” and continued:

Özel's limited criticisms of Trump's wars and his tepid statements of public support for the Doruk Mining workers in Ankara were intolerable not only to powerful factions of the Turkish bourgeoisie but also to Washington and the European capitals, who have made no significant criticisms of his ouster by Erdoğan. This created the conditions for Özel's removal, with the complicity of factions of the CHP itself led by K?l?çdarolu.

Özel's *Newsweek* article has confirmed this assessment within days. He is now working to prove to imperialist capitals that he can be a reliable voice on questions of war and class struggle.

The effort to convince the imperialists

Whatever the factional conflicts between Özel, K?l?çdarolu and Erdoğan, all three are representatives of the same ruling class, bound organically to imperialism. That is why Özel's article did not address the social and democratic rights of the working class, but rather the security concerns of the imperialists.

Özel's central argument runs as follows: the political crisis in Türkiye could trigger a social explosion; that explosion would destabilize NATO and the EU; the CHP is therefore the democratic alternative best equipped to contain such an explosion—more effectively than Erdoğan. The fact that the CHP prevented the spontaneous mass protests by young people and workers that erupted following ?mamo?lu's arrest in March 2025 from becoming radicalized and managed to bring them under control and bring them to an end, serves as a concrete and significant example.

In making this case, Özel emphasizes Türkiye's geopolitical significance: a gatekeeper of the Black Sea, NATO's second-largest military power, a crossroads of Europe and Eurasia. He warns that Türkiye risks becoming “a strategically indispensable [NATO] member that no longer functions as a democracy.” This posture is a continuation of K?l?çdarolu's approach—who declared NATO “the guarantor of democracy in the 21st century.”

The claim that NATO leaders have any interest in democratic rights—in Türkiye, in their own countries or anywhere else—is a fraud of the first order. Since its founding as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, NATO's history has been defined not only by imperialist aggression but by military coups and regime-change operations. The September 12, 1980 and July 15, 2016 coups in Türkiye, as well as the 2014 coup in Ukraine—a pivotal moment in provoking the present war against Russia—were all carried out with the backing of leading NATO powers.

Today, Washington and the European imperialists are maintaining a conspicuous silence in the face of the assault on the CHP. It is no coincidence that Erdoğan held phone calls with Trump both before

?mamo?lu's arrest and before the latest judicial operation against the CHP. The imperialist powers regard the Erdoğan government as a critical ally in securing their interests in the region: Türkiye continues to provide intelligence support to the US and Israel in their war against Iran; it continues to supply Israel with Azerbaijani oil even as the Gaza genocide continues; it is deepening military cooperation with Britain and France in NATO's war against Russia; and holds refugees within its borders on behalf of the EU.

By pledging to uphold NATO's security and interests in the region, Özel is promising to continue the foreign policy of the Erdoğan government. However, his argument that appeals most to imperialist powers is the capacity of the CHP—the party that founded the Republic of Türkiye and serves as the traditional party of the Turkish bourgeoisie—to contain social upheaval among the working class. The anti-war, anti-genocide, and “pro-labor” rhetoric that Özel occasionally invokes is merely a tool aimed at preserving this capacity. Özel's participation on Thursday in the 100th-anniversary celebration of Koç Holding, Türkiye's leading conglomerate, is an expression of his effort to reassure not only NATO leaders but also the dominant segments of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

A distortion of history

To shore up his argument, Özel draws on a liberal-imperialist reading of history, writing with significant distortions:

History teaches a consistent lesson: political systems do not become stable when alternatives disappear; they become stable when citizens believe peaceful change remains possible. The Soviet Union, the Shah's Iran, the Eastern Bloc, and much of the Arab world all appeared stable during the Cold War—until they suddenly did not. Systems are often most fragile precisely when they look most unchallengeable.

Özel's references to regime changes across the Arab world over the past 35 years serve a clear purpose. These were the products of imperialist interventions backed by the Turkish bourgeoisie—interventions that ultimately provided the impulse for the consolidation of a police state in Türkiye. The weapons of mass destruction lie in Iraq, the humanitarian intervention lie in Libya, a brutal proxy war in Syria. Millions were killed and displaced in these wars; what was left behind was not democracy but unstable regimes shaped by imperialist interests. The “democratization” narrative applied to these countries was nothing more than the ideological cover for imperialist re-colonization.

Özel's equation of the Soviet Union—a workers' state founded by the October Revolution of 1917, however deformed by Stalinist degeneration—with the Shah's regime in Iran, which served as Washington's gendarme in the Middle East until 1979, serves a purpose that goes beyond lumping them together as “totalitarian regimes.” While the dissolution of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism in 1991 were welcomed and actively encouraged by the imperialist world, the 1979 Iranian Revolution delivered a severe blow to Washington's interests in the Middle East.

The Shah's regime was a client state propped up by Western imperialists; the CIA's hand was in the 1953 coup that brought him to power. US imperialism, which never accepted the Shah's overthrow, subsequently imposed crippling sanctions, backed Iraq in the 1980–88 war against Iran and ultimately launched a direct military assault on February

28.

Özel's Iran references carry an implicit message to Washington and European capitals: if you allow a "Shah'-type regime" to develop in Türkiye, you risk creating conditions for an uncontrolled social explosion—one in which the working class plays a decisive role, as it did in Iran in 1979—whose consequences will not remain confined to Türkiye alone. Özel frames the point explicitly:

If current trends continue, Türkiye risks becoming something unprecedented in NATO's history: a strategically indispensable member that no longer functions as a democracy, while millions of its citizens grow increasingly dissatisfied with a political and economic order they have no peaceful democratic means to change. This would not merely be a domestic crisis. It would be a profound security challenge.

As for the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union in 1989–91, this was a historic social counterrevolution. This final betrayal of the October Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy paved the way not only in these countries but worldwide for the reversal of social and economic gains and for imperialist aggression, which has been steadily escalating and increasing the danger of nuclear conflict.

The October Revolution of 1917 represented a transformation in which, for the first time in history, the working class seized power and abolished capitalist property. However, the isolation of the Russian Revolution on an international scale, followed by civil war, economic collapse, and imperialist encirclement, paved the way for a bureaucratic layer to gradually establish control over the state. This bureaucracy, led by Josef Stalin, rejected the working class's strategy of international socialist revolution and adopted the theory of "socialism in one country"; Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, however, conducted a scientific analysis of this process and demonstrated that the bureaucracy was engaged in a continuous betrayal of the October Revolution's historical legacy. Trotsky had predicted that if the Soviet working class could not regain power through a political revolution that would restart the cycle of the world socialist revolution, the Stalinist bureaucracy would destroy the USSR.

The agreement reached between the imperialist powers and the USSR after World War II—based primarily on preventing workers' revolutions—temporarily prolonged the insurmountable internal crisis of the Stalinist regimes, but the globalization of capitalist production escalated this crisis to uncontrollable proportions. By the late 1980s, the economic deadlock and social decay created by the Stalinist bureaucracy had become unsustainable. The reforms of the Mikhail Gorbachev era were not aimed at mobilizing the working class as a conscious revolutionary force, but rather at preventing this and ensuring a smooth transition of the bureaucracy to capitalist property relations. The official dissolution of the USSR in 1991 marked the culmination of this process, in which Stalinist bureaucrats transformed into capitalist oligarchs.

The independent struggle of the working class

It is impossible to defend democratic rights and NATO and the EU simultaneously. These institutions are the instruments not only of their ruling classes' imperialist wars of plunder abroad, but of the class war waged against the working class at home. They are incompatible with any democratic form of governance.

The struggle for democratic rights therefore cannot be separated from

the struggle against imperialism and NATO. That struggle requires a radical political break—from bourgeois parties, and from the Stalinist, Pabloite and pseudo-left parties that channel the working class and youth behind a pro-imperialist party like the CHP. Not one of these parties has made an accounting for its support for K?I?çdar?lu in the 2023 presidential election—despite his openly pro-NATO and anti-immigrant platform. They are now forming up behind Özel's leadership to play the same role.

This is the Turkish expression of an international phenomenon: bourgeois and petty-bourgeois political forces, together with the trade union apparatus, are joining hands to neutralize a working class that is beginning to mobilize against war, genocide, austerity and political repression. The only revolutionary response to this offensive is to build an independent political movement of the working class—one that stands against all these forces. The developing independent workers' movement provides the social foundation for building an alternative outside the political establishment.

This movement must be armed with an international perspective rooted in Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. A democratic regime based on social equality and anti-imperialism can only be established as part of an international socialist revolution, under the leadership of the working class.

The NATO summit in Ankara and immediate demands

The 36th NATO summit, which Trump will attend, is scheduled to take place in Ankara on July 7–8. It convenes at a moment when imperialist wars are escalating at the expense of the masses, and when attacks on workers' living conditions and democratic rights are intensifying. Ahead of the summit, while Özel highlighted the importance of NATO's security and stability in his *Newsweek* article, the Erdoğan government is effectively imposing a state of emergency in Ankara: All demonstrations and events will be banned between July 1 and 15, activists will be barred from entering the city based on foreign intelligence reports, and "red zones" will be declared.

For the masses, NATO means wars, genocide and dictatorship. The Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi – Dördüncü Enternasyonal calls on workers and youth to mobilize against NATO and imperialism around the following demands:

- The US and Israeli war against Iran, the invasion of Lebanon, and the genocide in Gaza must be halted immediately and unconditionally.
- All US armed forces in the Middle East must be withdrawn, and the military bases—including those in Türkiye—that form the infrastructure of imperialist domination must be closed.
- The NATO summit scheduled for July in Ankara must be cancelled; Türkiye must withdraw from NATO; NATO must be dissolved; and all resources devoted to militarism and war must be redirected to meet the needs of society.
- All sanctions and economic warfare against Iran, Cuba and all other countries must be ended.
- All war criminals must be held accountable.
- Journalists, opposition politicians, and all political prisoners must be released.
- The fundamental democratic rights of the Kurdish people must be recognised immediately, beginning with mother-tongue education and constitutional recognition of the Kurdish language.

In this fight, the allies of the working class and youth are not the imperialist powers to whom Özel is appealing but workers and youth in the imperialist countries and across the world who face the same social

problems and the same class enemy. Özel’s article makes plain that he and his party stand—alongside Erdoğan and his “friends” Trump, Macron and the rest—on the other side of the barricade.



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