

HISTORY DOES NOT FLOW BACKWARDS

Eda Erdem, the Sultans of the Net and the Women of the Republic

Dr. Haluk R. Tükel

TÜKEL Research and Project Consultancy

Founding President and Alternate Board Member, Institut du Bosphore

Short version.* The original article was published on T24, an online news platform
14.09.2026



The Sultans of the Net's European championship is more than a sporting victory. It is a public declaration of the kind of woman shaped by the Republic: educated, self-confident, rising through her own efforts and present in public life without needing anyone's patronage. The issue is not how a woman dresses, but whether she has a say over her own life. Eda Erdem's words showed it once again: the path opened by the Republic has not closed; millions of women now walk it.

* The full-length version of this article is available from the author by email: halukreceptukel@icloud.com

More Than a Championship

Some sporting triumphs remain in the standings; others change the way a society thinks about itself. The Sultans of the Net's 3–2 victory over Italy in Istanbul, which made them European champions for a second consecutive time, belongs to the latter category. It has travelled far beyond a final won on court and become one of the most powerful statements that can be made about Türkiye's women, the Republic and social change.

The sporting result was clear: Türkiye had once again reached the summit of Europe. Yet the social meaning of the night was too large to fit on the scoreboard. Before millions stood women who were on their own feet, directed their own bodies and lives, and had worked their way into the ranks of the world's best. They were under no one's tutelage. They did not owe their success to a political office, a family elder or male authority. They represented themselves and their country, and they themselves defined what their achievement meant.

That is why captain Eda Erdem's post-match words—"On the path the Republic opened for us, we showed what Turkish women can achieve"—were no routine championship statement. They drew an explicit historical line between the trophy and the Republic, reminding us that today's successful women did not appear out of nowhere; they are walking a path opened before them. By dedicating the trophy to those who paved the way and to the girls who will follow, she lifted the achievement out of an individual heroic tale and placed it within an intergenerational continuum of social change.

Here, the Republic is not merely the name of a form of government. It is the historical ground upon which girls could attend school, women could enter professions, gain citizenship rights, take to the sports field and speak in their own voices before society. That ground was not laid perfectly, and equality between women and men has never been fully achieved. Yet it was the Republic that opened the great door through which women could move beyond the confines of the private sphere and enter education, working life, art, science and sport.

That is why anyone can claim the cup, but not everyone can as comfortably claim its social meaning. It is easy to take pride in a national success; harder to accept the ideal of free, secular and equal citizenship that made it possible. The contradiction appears precisely in a political language that applauds the gold medal but falls silent before the historical transformation that enabled the woman who won it to govern her own life. The cup is wanted; the social and historical identity of the woman who won it is sometimes treated as excess baggage.

The real issue is not whether a news agency carried Eda Erdem's words. The more important question is this: why does so simple a reference to the Republic still unsettle some circles? Why is a successful, educated and working woman who is visible in public life perceived as a threat by certain political and social outlooks?

We should not imprison this question within the old and false opposition between women who do not wear headscarves and women who do. Whether a woman wears a headscarf is merely the visible face of

the political tension. The real divide is between the dependent woman and the autonomous woman. A woman who earns her own income, advances in her profession, makes her own decisions and derives the legitimacy of her success from her own labour wins more than personal freedom: she also changes the distribution of power within the family, the workplace and the public sphere.

Because the autonomous woman does not ask permission; she exercises her rights as a citizen. She does not wait for patronage; she advances on merit. She does not fit into the role assigned to her; she draws the boundaries of her own life. Nor does she leave it to others to define the meaning of her success. That is exactly what Eda Erdem did: she defined the championship not simply as a source of national pride, but as the present-day outcome of the path the Republic opened for women.

The Politics, Sociology and Psychology of Sport

Sport is never just sport. Which disciplines receive resources, which children can access facilities, how competitions are televised, who governs federations and how victory is narrated are all political choices in their own right. States use sport to project power and international prestige; governments turn medals into vehicles of national unity. When the flag is raised, success is entered in the ledger of the entire country.

But sport has one feature that political power finds difficult to control: rhetoric cannot change the score. An athlete cannot become European champion merely through loyalty or membership in the right circles. Appointment may put someone on the court, perhaps, but without merit it cannot put them on the podium. The opposing team does not care about your domestic political balances or protocol list. The net is the same height for everyone; performance has the final word.

Türkiye's success in women's volleyball cannot be explained by a handful of talented athletes happening to emerge in the same generation. Behind it lie years of investment by clubs, a strong professional league, youth development, international technical expertise, families' sacrifices and the athletes' extraordinary labour. Success is the result of institutional continuity, openness to the world, scientific work and investment in human capital.

This picture shows that something Türkiye struggles to do elsewhere has been achieved in sport. When rules are upheld, talent is identified early, long-term investment is made and women are not confronted with barriers arising from their gender, Türkiye can succeed in global competition. The volleyball court thus becomes not only an arena of competition but a small-scale laboratory for a development model that works.

This is where the political contradiction begins. Success is readily claimed as a source of national pride, yet the autonomy of the social actor who produced it is not embraced with equal ease. The woman carrying the flag is applauded, but unease can arise when she speaks in her own voice, identifies the historical source of her success and defines herself not merely as "the nation's daughter" but as an equal citizen of the Republic. A medal can be incorporated into the government's narrative; the woman who won it does not always fit.

That is the force of Eda Erdem's sentence. She spoke not on behalf of those in power but from within the historical memory of her generation. She presented the Republic not as an anniversary ritual left in the past, but as a living social transformation that continues to produce results on the court today. Such words are not party politics; yet because they rest on women's equal citizenship, they are political in the broadest and most meaningful sense of the word.

Sport's decision-making institutions, however, have yet to match the equality visible on the court. According to data from TurkStat and UN Women, women won 53.5 percent of Türkiye's medals in international competitions in 2025. Yet women held only 7.3 percent of the board seats in ten major Olympic sports federations. Women produce the success, but the tables at which resources, institutions and decisions are governed are still occupied overwhelmingly by men. Women are visible on the podium and kept invisible in the rooms where decisions are made. Genuine equality will not be achieved by applauding female athletes as the celebrated face of national pride, but by giving women an equal say in the governance and decision-making of sport.

The sociological meaning of the championship is broader still. The public sphere consists not only of streets, squares, workplaces or sports halls. It is the realm in which people appear before society in their own identities, where their voices are heard and where they can exert influence over others. Who can be seen, who can speak and who can decide reveal the true distribution of power in a society.

The tacit bargain that traditional society makes with women rests on the opposite arrangement. Women are assigned an indispensable place within the family but a secondary place in public life. They are exalted as mothers, wives and self-sacrificing caregivers, yet receive far less support when they become professionals—economically independent citizens who speak in their own names. A woman's value is acknowledged while her autonomy is restricted. She is granted respectability, but not power.

The Sultans of the Net break this bargain not only through their words but through their very presence on the court. They are strong, competitive and resolute; they fight, direct one another and assume responsibility. The sports arena also changes the social meaning of the female body. A woman's body is no longer a passive object to be gazed at and judged by others; it is an active subject that runs, jumps, produces, decides and changes the outcome of the game. She does not merely become visible through her body; she performs a task and gives direction to a shared goal.

This transformation does not affect women alone. Millions of men become spectators and supporters of a success story led by women. Boys learn captaincy from a woman, resilience from a women's team and national pride from the achievements of female athletes. This time, men applaud from the stands while women set the play at centre court and assume responsibility at one of the country's defining moments. The scene teaches equality more powerfully than long political speeches ever could.

The championship's psychological impact lasts much longer than the joy felt on the night it was won. Telling a girl "You can succeed too" matters; letting her see women who have actually done so is far more powerful. A girl does not have to become Eda Erdem—or even a volleyball player. Watching her, she can imagine herself as a future team captain, company executive, scientist, orchestra conductor or elected

mayor. The female leadership visible on the volleyball court opens the door to possibilities in other walks of life.

It is difficult to imagine a life one has never seen. Every successful woman in the public sphere therefore multiplies the possible futures available to those who follow. A single example can be dismissed as an exception; when success recurs across generations, however, the social norm changes. The phrase “A woman can do it too” gives way to the fact that “Women are already doing it.”

The Sultans of the Net also generate a sense of collective efficacy: when we prepare properly, share responsibilities, allow different abilities to complement one another and uphold merit, we can succeed. Against the learned helplessness nourished by economic uncertainty, institutional erosion and unending crises, sport provides visible proof that joint effort can change the outcome. After losing a point, the team resets; when it falls behind, it does not give up. Success ceases to be an abstract wish and materialises before millions as the result of labour.

Yet not every advance toward equality produces the same emotion in everyone. Those who benefit from entrenched privileges may perceive the empowerment of others as a loss of their own power. The unease that appears among some men and within hierarchical institutions as women’s economic independence, public standing and decision-making capacity grow often stems not from the loss of any genuine right but from the assumption that privilege is normal.

For this reason, successful women evoke not only admiration but also status anxiety. On the court, they refute one by one the prejudices that women cannot lead, withstand pressure, act collectively or keep emotion from distorting judgment. An authoritarian order wants it predetermined who will speak, who will obey and who will decide. By refusing the place assigned to her, the autonomous woman disrupts this hierarchy; she does not merely move upward, but changes society’s very conception of “above” and “below.”

Why Does Power Fear Autonomous and Successful Women?

To say simply that “those in power fear women” explains too little. Political authorities may celebrate women’s achievements, pose for photographs with female athletes and declare their support for women’s participation in social life. Indeed, the championship of the Sultans of the Net was celebrated at the highest levels of the state. The issue is not whether women are visible, but under what conditions—and within whose prescribed limits—they are allowed to be visible.

Power does not reside only in Ankara, parliament or state institutions. It is also produced within the family, the workplace, the school, the sports club and everyday interactions. Who decides, who controls income, whose word is final and who must seek another’s permission are all questions of power. Women’s autonomy changes the established distribution of power across every one of these arenas.

The traditional patriarchal order restricts women not only because it devalues them, but because it insists on defining their value on its own terms. It may exalt women as mothers, wives and self-sacrificing pillars

of the family while feeling threatened when they set their own priorities as independent individuals. For the woman who is exalted is assigned duties; the autonomous woman demands rights. The first gains respect within a prescribed role; the second draws the boundaries of that role herself.

A successful woman in working life is therefore more than an economic actor. A woman who earns her own income becomes less dependent on her father, husband, family, employer or systems of political patronage. As dependence diminishes, so does the expectation of obedience. She can decide more freely where to live, whether to work, whether to marry and how to cast her vote. Economic independence becomes political and social independence.

The rise of successful women also strengthens their claim to places at the tables where decisions are made. Women want not merely to work but to lead; not merely to implement but to decide; not merely to be represented but to represent themselves. When they win medals as athletes, they demand a voice in the federation; when they create value as employees, they demand one in the boardroom; when they form the majority of voters, they demand one in political decision-making bodies. This is the point at which applause is no longer enough and authority must be shared.

What causes anxiety is not women's presence, but the end of a monopoly on decision-making. Equality deprives no one of a legitimate right; it does limit the superior position of those who mistake privilege for entitlement. Someone long accustomed to speaking alone may experience another person's voice as the silencing of their own. To a man who regards the right to rule as his natural privilege, equality can look like loss rather than justice.

This anxiety also has a cultural dimension. In Türkiye, the educated, professional woman who did not wear a headscarf became one of the most visible symbols of the Republic's modernisation. In the Republic's early decades, women's public presence was at times represented through a single model of the modern woman, while the unjust restrictions encountered by headscarved women in education and employment were not adequately acknowledged. This history must be recognised.

But exclusion in the past cannot justify restricting other women's ways of life today. The struggle of headscarved women to enter the public sphere as equal citizens is every bit as legitimate as the right of women who do not wear one to live without being forced into any cultural mould. Moreover, the headscarved woman and the autonomous woman are not opposites. A woman who wears a headscarf may be educated, economically independent and critical of political authority; a woman without a headscarf may be trapped in relations of dependence. What matters is not clothing but who makes the decisions about a woman's life. The real divide is not between covered and uncovered, but between the woman under tutelage and the free citizen.

That is also the historic test facing conservative politics in Türkiye. Will the principles of rights, freedom and equal citizenship invoked in defence of headscarved women's entry into public life be defended with equal resolve for women who lead different lives? Will the visibility of "our women" be deemed sufficient, or will the autonomy of all women be recognised? Democratic consistency is measured not by the freedom

we grant those who resemble us, but by how well we protect the freedom of those who live differently from us.

Today's family policies must be viewed through the same distinction. The government's designation of 2026–2035 as the "Decade of Family and Population" is an understandable policy response to falling fertility and an ageing population. Türkiye's demographic transformation is real, and families need economic and social support as they raise children. The issue is not whether the family should be protected, but what conception of the individual—and of women—will underpin it.

The Ministry of Family and Social Services' vision document calls for promoting marriage, increasing fertility and aligning public policy with family and population goals. It also argues that the family institution has come under the influence of harmful trends rooted in "gender ideology," which, it argues, exploit the language of human rights and freedoms. This language matters because it reveals how the tension between demographic concerns and women's individual rights has entered official thinking.

Yet the family and women's freedom are not opposites. A family founded on women's dependence is not strong but fragile. A strong family is one in which two equal adults share responsibilities, income, care work and decision-making authority. Policies that push women out of employment, place the entire burden of childcare on them and rank motherhood above citizenship weaken women's capacity to contribute to society.

The figures show that Türkiye's real problem is not excessive female autonomy but women's insufficient participation in economic and managerial life. The labour-force participation rate is 36.8 percent for women and 72 percent for men. The employment rate is 32.5 percent for women, compared with 66.9 percent for men. Women make up 21.5 percent of senior and middle management and 18.3 percent of the board members of BIST 50 companies. Women can expect to remain in working life for 20.7 years; men, for 39.7 years.

These figures do not show women taking over the public sphere; they show it still held overwhelmingly by men. Even so, the cultural impact of a few powerful and visible women can far exceed their numerical weight. Women such as Eda Erdem do not merely attain individual success; they also dismantle the social limits placed on what women are thought capable of doing.

A successful woman poses a living question to the existing distribution of power: if she can lead a team at the pinnacle of European competition, speak before millions and shape a country's shared emotions, why should she not lead companies, federations, universities, municipalities—or the country itself—with the same competence?

There is no convincing answer. That is why the campaign against the autonomous woman often takes the form not of an explicit ban but of belittlement, erasure, surveillance of her private life, attribution of her success to others or removal of her words from context. Her achievement is acknowledged, but every effort is made to neutralise the independent subject that achievement has produced.

But fear, too, has its limit: once success becomes visible, it cannot be taken back. After a girl has seen a powerful woman carry her country to the summit, it becomes ever harder to persuade her that there are things women cannot do. Once a society has witnessed women's capacity, the old hierarchy can no longer be presented as a natural and immutable order.

History Does Not Flow Backwards

History does not advance in a straight line. Societies can at times fall back; rights may be narrowed, institutions weakened and women's public visibility curtailed. No social gain is therefore automatically or permanently secure. The path the Republic opened for women can be protected only by those who continue to walk it.

But political regression is not the same as the complete erasure of historical experience. A law can be amended, an institution closed, a sentence removed from an official news report. Yet an educated woman cannot be made to forget what she has learned; a woman who has tasted economic independence cannot be induced to embrace dependence willingly once more; millions of girls cannot be told to act as though they never saw the success before their eyes.

The Republic's most enduring achievement should be sought here. It lives not only in institutions established by the state, constitutional provisions or official ceremonies. It continues to live in women's desire to attend school, their insistence on acquiring a profession, their presence in public life under their own names, their willingness to speak against injustice and their aspiration to a broader life for girls. Put differently, the Republic has passed from the state into society.

In its first century, the state opened a path for women. In the second, women are widening that path with their own footsteps. They are no longer silent recipients of rights bestowed from above, but citizens who reconstruct the meaning of those rights, reveal their shortcomings and push their boundaries forward. Herein lies the historical significance of Eda Erdem's words: it is not an official authority, but the woman whose achievement it is, who tells us what the Republic has given women.

The championship of the Sultans of the Net does not show that gender equality has been completed in Türkiye. On the contrary, it makes visible the continuing inequality of representation from sports federations to corporate boards and politics. Yet it also proves beyond doubt the level women can reach when barriers are removed. The problem is not women's capacity, but the failure to build equal institutions that allow that capacity to flourish.

The anxiety of those who see women's growing power in the public sphere as a weakening of their own authority will therefore prove futile. For they face not a handful of elite athletes, but a broad social transformation propelled by education, urbanisation, working life, communication technologies and generational change. This transformation can be slowed down, made more costly and obstructed; it cannot be uprooted from society's memory.

Can fear stave off the inevitable? No. What is at issue here is not the lifespan of individuals, but the historical lifespan of an old power structure founded on women's dependence. As equality advances, the end of certain privileges is inevitable. What is being lost is not society's power, but the monopoly over decisions affecting the lives of half the population.

Dams can be built across rivers; their beds can be narrowed and their flow slowed for a time. But water cannot be ordered to run backwards. The Republic's principles of equality, secularism, citizenship and merit now surge not only through official texts but through millions of people's expectations for their own lives. The Sultans of the Net are one of that river's most visible and powerful tributaries.

On the night of the final, the scoreboard recorded Türkiye's 3–2 victory over Italy. The historical result beyond the court was greater: Türkiye's women once again declared that their presence in public life is not temporary; they intend to stay, and in the next phase of the game they want not only to compete but also to help make the rules.

History does not flow backwards. The path opened by the Republic is now being walked not only by Eda Erdem and her teammates, but by millions of girls following in their footsteps.

References

Ministry of Family and Social Services. (2026). *Decade of Family and Population 2026–2035 Vision Document*. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Family and Social Services.

Anadolu Agency. (2026, September 6). Türkiye Women's National Volleyball Team becomes European champion for a second consecutive time.

Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), 75–78.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination* (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954–969.

T24. (2026, September 7). Eda Erdem: On the path the Republic opened for us, we showed what Turkish women can achieve.

Turkish Statistical Institute & UN Women Türkiye. (2026). *Women in Statistics in Türkiye 2025*. TurkStat.

UN Women. (2026, May 21). Five things to know about women and sport.