

THE ‘PURE’ NATION AGAINST THE ‘CORRUPT’ OUTSIDERS: THE AKP’S POPULIST FOREIGN POLICY

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To date, the AKP’s foreign policy framework has evolved through three distinct phases: the phase of liberal internationalism characterized by a commitment to the EU and multilateralism (2002–2007); the phase of civilizational expansionism characterized by an overly confident, pan-Islamist and expansionist foreign policy (2008–2014); and the current phase of nationalist expansionism, anti-Westernism and the reprioritization of containment regarding the Kurdish issue (Ozcan 2018). Although the level of populism has varied across these three phases, Turkish foreign policy has exhibited the key social and political features of a populist vision in all three periods. The country’s foreign policy has been flexible and shapeshifting throughout, driven by the governing elite’s opportunistic adaptation to changing international and regional dynamics, domestic constraints, and intense elite conflict. However, it was only in the last phase that the main components of populist foreign policy became adamantly apparent.

Populism does not translate into specific ideological orientations or substantive preferences in foreign policy (Cadier 2021: 2). More importantly, the thick ideologies espoused by populist parties/leaders, the level of domestic elite conflict, the structural positions of countries in the international system and opportunity structures almost always mitigate the impact of populism on foreign policy (Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann 2021: 9, Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). Yet, in all cases, populists share some distinguishable patterns of foreign policy governance and tend to reinforce several trends in international affairs.

First, in a setting where a populist party has consolidated its power, populist antagonism against the domestic political establishment shifts to the outside world and often targets foreign countries for the purpose of domestic mobilization. This allows populist actors to shift the blame on the external actors and reinforce conspiratorial thinking (Destradi and Plagemann 2019: 717). Second, populists almost invariably emphasize elevating the status of their countries in the international system, claiming that outsiders would be doing vast injustices to their respective countries. Third, because of the widespread perception of injustices and the emphasis on status elevation, populists usually stress au-

tonomy and underline the need for a diversification of foreign relationships and international partnerships (Destradi 2021). This tendency often results in the disintegration of existing international alliances when structural factors become more permissive for populists (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). And finally, when in power, populists tend to centralize foreign policy decision-making “by investing foreign policy making as a site to perform a rupture with technocratic elites” (Cadier 2021: 2). These four factors transform foreign policy into an area which populists use as a site for the continuation of domestic politics by other means. According to Visnovitz and Jenne (2021: 2), “the ‘sovereignty’ warrant—the principle that ‘the people’ should rule—lies at the heart of all these populist arguments”.

Blame-shifting and Conspiratorial Thinking

The first hallmark of populist foreign policy is a style of confrontational diplomacy based on blame-shifting and conspiratorial thinking. Indeed, after they have themselves become part of the governing elite, populists need to keep constructing enemies (Destradi et al. 2021). Populists then externalize their shortcomings and wrongdoings by pointing to the perceived powerholders in the global system as the new obstacle to their success (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). These power centers (i.e., the financial oligarchy or global political elites) are accused of usurping the powers that rightfully belong to the sovereign nation-states. Usually, these centers are presented as forging hidden plans to either top-

ple the elected leadership of a sovereign country or weaken the power of the country with their sneaky policies. The presentation of the outside powers as “the new corrupt elite” resonates with the public whose deeply held suspicions toward Western powers make them receptive to such populist arguments.

In fact, Balta et al. (2021) find that in Turkey, the populists, embodied by the incumbent party, the AKP, control the political system. Therefore, they need to frame external actors and forces as seeking to subvert the will of “the pure people” and thus constituting the new/real “corrupt elite”. As a result of this type of manipulation (or rhetorical guidance), AKP supporters’ attitudes regarding foreign policy matters tended to be more conspiratorial rather than populist. Conspiracy theories in Turkey exclusively focus on the hidden political ambitions of mostly Western powers, while drawing parallels between the Ottoman imperial history and its subsequent disintegration and almost always assuming the presence of internal collaborators (i.e., enemies of the people). They are based on inflated self-confidence, manifesting themselves as a kind of superiority complex. The conspiratorial stance is not only attached to a vaguely defined anti-Westernism but is also expressed in venomous hatred of financial centers and foreign governments — in fact, of virtually any external actor that challenges or criticizes the AKP government. The latter’s populist rhetoric of blame attribution and “corrupt outsiders” resonates well with its voters’ beliefs and has allowed the AKP to ask its base to tolerate and forgive policies

that fail to improve their own quality of life and other government failures. Even though this strategy may initially be effective, its medium- and long-term success depends on the continued provision of well-being to the populist support base (Demiralp and Balta 2021).

Status Elevation Demands

The second hallmark of populist foreign policy is an aspiration for status elevation on the international stage (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). Similar to their claim on the domestic front (i.e., elevating the status of the pure people vis-à-vis the corrupt ruling elite), populists want to elevate their countries' status from that of an underdog in a given international or regional order to that of an order-setter. This was the case even for Trump's America. Trump complained and convinced his followers that America was unjustly bearing the burden and costs of the international order at the expense of pursuing its proper interests. Status elevation, then, was about putting America first and (re)claiming the status it deserved globally.

Such demands for status elevation are widely seen in the global South too. Critical of the structure of international organizations, such as the composition of the UN Security Council, populist leaders ask for a global redistribution of power. For the AKP government too, populist discourse has served as a template for expressing long-standing grievances about the unequal distribution of global power. With his motto "the world is bigger than five", President Erdogan has expressed

his discontent with the current structure of the UN.

The AKP government has also insisted that its assertive and shifting foreign policy had restored the country's status and honor in the West. Specifically, after the financial crisis of 2008, Turkey's economic growth and consequent infrastructural investments were not only seen as domestic achievements, but increasingly also as a symbol of the power and glory of the state. Thus, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan frequently cited jealousy as the main reason why foreign countries were opposing and conspiring against Turkey.

Analyzing Erdogan's key statements regarding Europe and the EU during election periods since the 2011 election, Aydin-Düzgüt (2016: 55) finds that the West and Europe are largely negatively represented as "an unwanted intruder in Turkish politics," as well as politically, economically, and normatively "inferior" to Turkey. Furthermore, all previous Turkish governments are denounced as being too submissive to the 'West'. Thus, the discourse establishes a clear demarcation between Turkey's elevated power status before and after AKP rule (Aydin-Düzgüt 2016: 51).

Diversification of Alliances

The third hallmark of populist foreign policy is the potential alteration and diversification of international partnerships or alliances to reduce dependency on a single ally and achieve greater room for maneuver (Destradi et al. 2021). Here too, the 'popular sovereignty' warrant serves to back the govern-

ment's claims that foreign policy should be autonomous and should not depend explicitly on commitments to alliances (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021).

Not unexpectedly therefore, the central driving force of the AKP's foreign policy has been its flexibility and opportunism (Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar 2018). After the AKP consolidated its power and started seeing more opportunities for itself in the wider region around 2010, it opted for a stronger "decentering of Turkey's Western orientation in favor of the country as a multi-regional actor in international politics" (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019: 12). The AKP government has somehow attempted to modify and diversify Turkey's political alliances by deprioritizing the Transatlantic Alliance and aligning with Russia. Moreover, these pragmatic bilateral arrangements are in fact preferred since they clearly exhibit the leader's claim for the status as the sole legitimate representative of "the real people" (Plageman and Destradi 2019).

To justify their decisions, the governing elites increasingly refer to the decline of the Western-dictated international order. They suggest that the West is incapable of countering the threats that Turkey is facing in a conflict-ridden region, while also pointing out the emerging opportunities for countries like Turkey in a possible post-Western future. This discursive shift has enabled Turkey to make certain policy choices, e.g., purchasing S-400 air defense units from Russia despite intense criticism from its Western allies. Responding to this criticism, the government

frequently cited the independence and autonomy of Turkey's foreign policy as a sovereign nation. According to this argument, sovereign nations can engage with whom they see fit and without any intervention by their traditional partners.

Deinstitutionalization and Personalization

The fourth hallmark of populist foreign policy is the personalization and deinstitutionalization of diplomacy. This trait marks a continuation of the trend toward deinstitutionalization in domestic politics, where populists, in contradistinction to bureaucrats and expert knowledge, represent themselves as the champions of common sense. In foreign policy, this means that populist governments are more likely to sideline Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and professional diplomats (Cadier 2021). In many cases, leaders began to communicate about foreign policy matters directly with foreign governments and their own domestic support base, preferring not to involve any intermediaries.

Similarly, the AKP's populist vision has also rested on this direct connection between the leader and "the people", excluding any intermediaries. Prior to the advent of the AKP, foreign policy priorities and guidelines were largely determined by the armed forces and foreign ministry professionals. However, during the last decade, Erdogan's governments have stridently attacked diplomats as an elite group with no tangible connection to the people, declaring that "they are 'mon cher's, we are the servants" (Tas 2020: 7). Parallel to this restructuring in domestic politics, the President began to dominate foreign policy

decision-making, with only few oversight mechanisms that would give more room to inter-agency consultation. Personal relationships between leaders also began to play a crucial role in determining Turkey's foreign policy choices.

As Tas observes (2020: 7), while sidelining the MFA, the President's office founded new agencies under the direct control of the President. Meanwhile, appointed its foreign policy advisors in an *ad hoc* manner and granted extensive powers to other existing institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). All these patterns resulted in a personalization of foreign policy.

Concluding Remarks

In the last decade, Turkey has gone from being promoted as a model Islamic democracy to a model for authoritarianism. While the country's overall orientation has shifted from Westernization to anti-

Westernization, its foreign policy has turned away from the principle of "zero problems with neighbors" and become more crisis-prone. The concept of populist foreign policy is the most useful tool for explaining these dramatic transformations and abrupt shifts that have occurred under the rule of the same party. Foreign policy is not what would make any political party populist, but populist political parties share some similar patterns. These patterns, although they may prove effective in consolidating domestic support and mobilizing the grievances of the electorate, engender an unstable and unpredictable foreign policy. This in turn, can come with grave consequences for regional and global stability as well as for the national interests of the country pursuing a populist foreign policy. By putting democratic norms into question and by deinstitutionalizing and personalizing foreign policy governance, populist governments weaken multilateral institutions, damage diplomatic relations, and complicate international compromise-building.

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