

Exploring Populism in Erdoğan's Discourse on Turkey–European Union Relations

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ABSTRACT	<p>Many political leaders have adopted populist themes in their foreign policy discourses, motivated by, for example, revisionism, domestic mobilisation, and personalisation of foreign policy. Since the failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has become a prime example of this trend. This article analyses Turkey's relationship with the European Union (EU) by deciphering populist themes in his discourses. The article's method, thematic discourse analysis, examines speeches and statements from multiple data sources using a deductive codebook. According to the study's qualitative and quantitative in-depth analysis people-centrism, partnership diversification, general will, positive partisanship, and personalisation emerge as distinct populist themes in Erdoğan's speeches. Erdoğan uses populism to project the image of strong/charismatic leadership as a genuine representation of the will of oppressed people(s). In his discourses, special weight is given to people-centrism, and it is supported by the themes of general will and personalisation.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Populism is a contested and multifaceted research concept with numerous definitions and methodologies. As a thin concept, it is an *“ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups – the pure people vs. the corrupt elite – and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”*

(MUDDE 2004: 543).

The large body of the literature on populism problematises the concept primarily in connection with domestic politics. Its constitutive features have been examined with regard to party politics, ideologies, political sociology, and specific agenda settings. However, as the number of hybrid regimes has grown, populism has spread beyond domestic politics and become prominent in foreign policy as well (SCHENKKAN 2017). Populism, as a contested concept and an empty shell, emerges in foreign policy discourse as a strategy, a communication style, a rhetoric, or a combination thereof. The domestic/international distinction has become increasingly blurred and meaningless; politicians use populist foreign policy discourses to reflect their identities, preferences, and values (CHRYSOGELOS 2017: 14).

In foreign policy analysis, populism is an underexplored and relatively neglected sub-field. The extent to which populist politicians politicise foreign policy has not been addressed in the literature (DESTRADI – PLAGEMANN – TAŞ 2022). More specifically, the ties between populism's internal and international elements are blurred which is an underexplored issue. The question of what constitutes a *populist* foreign policy and under what conditions remains an ambiguous subject. Another gap in the populist foreign policy literature concerns its methodological implications. Drawing attention to the ongoing theoretical and conceptual debate, Chryssogelos (2017) calls for empirical studies on populism, particularly ones driven by critical and discursive methodologies. This study responds by problematising and exposing the populist tendencies that arise in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy discourses on ties with the EU. Moreover, by using thematic discourse analysis, the empirical analysis seeks to bridge a methodological gap in studying populist foreign policy.

The paper considers populism as a state of discourse with the overarching notion that Turkey's current state of behaviour (Europeanisation) shows a negative trend of disengagement from the EU (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2023: 3). We analyse Erdogan's speeches and statements between July 2016 and September 2022 using nine populist theme codes inspired by Destradi et al. (2019, 2021, 2022): general will, bilateralism, diversification, new Turkey, anti-elitism, positive partisanship, negative partisanship, people-centrism, and personalisation. The study also interrogates Erdogan's populism by contrasting alternative datasets, relevant bureaucratic structures, rival agenda shaping, and his roles as president and party leader.

People-centrism, partnership diversification, general will, positive partisanship, and personalisation are among the distinctive populist themes in Erdogan's foreign policy discourse. Given his clear emphasis on people-centrism, which is reinforced by general will and personalisation, the analysis demonstrates that Erdogan utilises populism to project the image of strong/charismatic leadership as a *true/real* representation of the will of *oppressed* people(s). Partnership diversification and positive partisanship are rarely deployed in his personalised foreign policy language, which emerged most prominently during election campaigns and in discussions on the issues of Syria and counterterrorism.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework – populist foreign policy discourse – to explain the deductive research codes used. The second section details the rise of populism in Turkey since 2016, and also includes a literature review. The third section describes the research design and the methodology of thematic discourse analysis. The final section presents both a qualitative and a quantitative data analysis and the findings of the study.

POPULISM AS A STATE OF DISCOURSE IN FOREIGN POLICY

According to Zürn (2004), populism represents the response of national societies to the collaboration and emancipation of state apparatuses. The populist worldview underlines the competition of *good* versus *bad* as a political technique, a style, and a form of communication. Populists regard their followers, *the people*, as empty signifiers amenable to contestation and reinvention (LACLAU 2005: 40–41). Populist leaders survive through the

polarisation they create in their political discourses, seeking the support of the grassroots against their political opponents. In this context, Barr (2009: 44) defines populism as a “*mass movement led by an outsider or maverick, seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitary linkages*”.

The conflict between good and evil can occasionally transcend national borders and take shape through foreign policy agendas. International politics can reflect popular politicisation, as opposed to new transnational political groupings that aim to re-politicise governance on an international scale. Although there is no scholarly consensus on populist foreign policy discourse, empirical studies reveal how themes such as nativism, anti-elitism, people-centrism, stress on national sovereignty, and the rejection of globalisation, pluralism, and multilateralism emerge as the rationale behind populist discourses (BALFOUR ET AL. 2016: 23).

For populists, foreign policy is a field on which it is easy to fight *corrupt elites* and those scary others who threaten *virtuous people* (ALBERTAZZI – MCDONNELL 2015; ENGESSER ET AL. 2017). Populism, as a state of discourse, can target foreign leaders, countries or international/regional organisations. Non-interference in domestic affairs and demonising the “autocratic” bureaucrats (anti-elitism) of the international community may emerge as common themes of populist movements (CANOVAN 1999). Using rhetoric pitting the pure against outsiders, populist actors claim to be the defenders and voice of the *general will*. This narrative may result in furthering popular sovereignty as a populist principle in foreign policy discourse.

Populist actors tend not to adopt traditional positions in international affairs (VERBEEK – ZASLOVE 2017). Their discourse foments opposition to transgovernmentalism with the aim of re-politicising external relations (ZÜRN 2004). First, from a zero-sum game approach, populist leaders frame international institutions and principles as foreign-control mechanisms or devices used by certain groups (CHAMBERS 2017). Since multilateralism may challenge the status quo and also due to the share of sovereignty in the transnational order, they prefer *bilateralism to multilateralism*. Empirical studies on multilateralism show that anti-Americanism (opposition to the US-led world order, which includes the related ideology and international organisations) and Euroscepticism are two separate features of

populist foreign policy discourse. Because of its unique structure, the EU is increasingly targeted by populist actors adopting principled (hard) or contingent (soft) Eurosceptic attitudes (BALFOUR ET AL. 2016; VERBEEK – ZASLOVE 2017; PIRRO – TAGGART – VAN KESSEL 2018; LAMMERS – ONDERCO 2020). Second, antipathy towards the current status quo and global order may open the way to a new foreign policy, shifting the network of interactions, and opening the door to fragmentation and *partnership diversification* (DESTRADI – CADIER – PLAGEMANN 2021). An exclusive kind of nationalism with reactionary, chauvinistic, nostalgic, and ethnocultural features, may pave the way for a shift in international orientation: that is, the (re)construction of a *new state identity* in world politics (HERMANN 1990).

Populists often reinforce national identities along such lines as legitimate versus illegitimate and national versus non-national (KALIBER – KALIBER 2019). An anti-establishment appeal and an *us versus them* dualism are incorporated into foreign policy rhetoric for domestic consumption in multiple ways. First, populists can portray their foreign policy as a reflection of the domestic society's viewpoints (MANOW – SCHÄFER – ZORN 2008). They depict themselves as the true representatives of the people's rights and interests (people-centrism), using a morally framed vocabulary to rail against the internal and external powers that hurt the country and its people. They paint a picture of a leader/party as the protector and servant of the pure nation. Second, populist leaders overstate threats both at home and abroad (HALL 2020), and use sensationalist and provocative language to portray opposition organisations as treacherous accomplices of external powers (negative partisanship) acting against pure and virtuous people (MOUNK 2014; WICAKSANA – WARDHANA 2021; DESTRADI – PLAGEMANN – TAŞ 2022). Third, people-centrism and negative partisanship combine to create *positive partisanship*, which serves as another populist ingredient for domestic (electoral) mobilisation. Discourses may evolve to achieve this goal, glorifying national identity and its characteristics (language, religion, civilisation), as well as historical heroism from a majoritarian perspective. In such discourses, external perils and domestic collaborators pave the way for a plea for unity and togetherness, particularly during elections.

Populism, as a political style in foreign policy discourses, exhibits not only bad manners such as coarse language and constant representations of threats and crises, but also a desire to depart from traditional

and appropriate ways of policy behaviour ^(MOFFITT 2016). If populist actors gain power, their tenets can alter decision-making processes and foreign policy practices.

First, anti-elitism and people-centrism steer decision-making processes towards centralisation and *personalisation* (around a leader or a party) of foreign policy – namely autocratisation. In this context, individual (leader) populism in foreign policy is characterised primarily by a reliance on centralised power in direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers ^(WEYLAND 2001: 14). If the actor is in power, populism refers to the process and practices of foreign policymaking that go beyond the state of discourse ^(DESTRADI – CADIER – PLAGEMANN 2021). However, populism as a state of discourse remains an important topic for us to investigate with regard to two questions: (a) whether the relevant institutions and actors have moved away from the traditional language of politicisation and polarisation that populists use in their statements; and (b) whether the institutions have developed parallel thematic discourses with the populist leader.

Second, the unity required for the conflict between good and evil produces an environment which fosters faith in powerful leaders offering a Manichean and moralistic worldview ^(COLGAN – KEOHANE 2017). Centralised foreign policy affords the image of a *strong and charismatic leader*, contributing to the cult of the saviour and protector leader ^(WOJCZEWSKI 2022). Foreign policy, as a manifestation of people-centrism, anti-elitism and popular will, is reduced to the leader, free of diplomatic traditions and institutions. Personalisation in foreign policy is evident in the methods of communication, the content of the discourse – simplicity (simplistic terms of good versus evil) and emotionalisation (emotionalise – to present and/or interpret something emotionally) – and those to whom it is addressed. Populist politicians will employ undiplomatic rhetoric – often aggressive, occasionally vague – on social media, and overemphasise personal connections with foreign leaders ^(LOWNDES 2005: 146; LACLAU 2005; DESTRADI – PLAGEMANN 2019).

While scholars have explored what constitutes a populist foreign policy – including its impact, style, and process, as well as pattern-type relationships ^(TAŞ 2022A) – a significant gap in the literature remains regarding when, in what form, and how populism emerged in international politics.

Additional research on alternative populist themes is needed to address this gap. Moreover, empirical analysis, particularly critical and discursive analysis, is required to widen and strengthen the current conceptual and theoretical discussions on populism (CHRYSSOGELOS 2017).

THE POPULIST DISCOURSE IN TURKEY: EU RELATIONS SINCE 2016

Turkey's bid for EU membership, dating back to 1987, constitutes one of the most complicated Europeanisation/enlargement cases. In the 1990s, as Mayor of Istanbul and a member of the Islamist Welfare Party, Erdogan frequently referred to the EU as a 'Christian Club'; he fought Westernism in domestic politics and Western Orientalism in foreign policy, injecting identity politics and strong populist elements into the debate (TANIYICI 2003). The coup of 28 February 1997 sparked an intra-party schism between traditionalists and reformists. The reformist wing, led by Erdogan, expressed its rejection of old attitudes and beliefs by establishing the Justice and Development Party (JDP – *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), described as a conservative democratic party.

During the early years of his government, Turkey was Europeanising, including in its foreign and security policy, with EU membership as its reference point and goal (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2005). In the early years, the JDP's populist tendencies were less in evidence. Turkey implemented major reforms in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria and began membership negotiations in 2005. However, this honeymoon period lasted only another couple of years. Veto barriers to negotiating chapters, unresolved disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus, and changes in Turkey's political environment stalled the progress towards EU membership. In Turkey, the transition toward a competitive authoritarian regime became evident due to the problems in elections, violations of human rights and freedoms, and repression of opposition after the 2013 Gezi Park protests (ESEN – GUMUSCU 2016). Subsequently, Erdogan's populist tendencies began to re-emerge in his foreign policy speeches. Specific EU-related initiatives after the Syrian crisis, such as the readmission agreement, visa liberalisation, and modernisation of the Customs Union, failed to propel the progress in EU-Turkey relations.

The coup attempt of 15 July 2016 marked a milestone in Turkish domestic and foreign affairs. The declaration of a state of emergency and the implementation of a political system that concentrated power in the president caused tension and recrimination between Turkey and the EU. Erdogan's position on the West, particularly the EU, became harsher, and populist themes became more prominent in his foreign policy discourses (ROGENHOFER 2018). Since then, he has deployed a thick populism characterised by anti-Western discourses redefining the West as the 'other' (KALIBER – KALIBER 2019). Erdogan has accused the West of encouraging a pro-coup mindset (DW 2016), supporting terrorists (ANADOLU AJANSI 2017), and applying double standards (YENI ŞAFAK 2020). Meanwhile, the EU has become more explicitly critical of the changing political environment in Turkey – in particular the passage of emergency laws and the transition to a so-called 'presidential' system – highlighting the increase in illiberal and undemocratic initiatives and policy practices (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2018: 3–4) and accusing Turkey of democratic backsliding (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2021: 10–15).

Previous researchers investigating populism in Turkey concentrated on causal explanations at several levels, such as ideological roots, leadership, domestic policy, and international relations. One group categorises the ideological foundation and type of populism in Turkey as right-wing (AYTAÇ – ÖNİŞ 2014) with an Islamist and authoritarian orientation (BAYKAN 2018). The rise of populism in Turkey is also discussed with a focus on the JDP's ideological shift from conservatism to nationalism (SHUKRI 2019; TAŞ 2022B) as a reflection of the regime's new competitive authoritarian structure (CASTALDO 2018) and as an anti-democratic practice (ROGENHOFER 2018).

A second group of studies focuses on domestic reasons for the rise of populism in Turkey. Some frame the Turkish populism as a response to political and economic crises (ARSLANTAŞ – ARSLANTAŞ 2023; DOĞAN 2020). Others look to the leadership, depicting Erdogan's populism as a political tool for manipulation and public mobilisation (TÜRK 2018), as a means for his supporters to tap into a politics of belonging (SAWAE 2020), or as a means of reinforcing his authority via intra-party dynamics (LANCASTER 2014). His populist discourses emerge as a reflection of the cult of personality: he portrays himself as the father of a conservative nation by virtue of his political masculinity (EKSI – WOOD 2019).

At the international level, the populist rhetoric in Turkey is framed as a reflection of changes in state identity (KALIBER – KALIBER 2019; ÖZBEY ET AL. 2019) and as an issue of civilisation (GÜRSOY 2021). For instance, Cook (2009) argues that the populism in Turkey is a breakaway from the traditional Euro-Atlantic line (IBID.). Avatkov (2021) concludes that the rising Turkish populism is a way to form a new Turkish-centric subsystem of international relations – a *Turkic world* enriched by neo-Ottomanism, neo-pan-Turkism, and Islam. A security-oriented study, on the other hand, associates the Turkish populism with the concept of *the non-Western self* based on ontological insecurity (ÇAPAN – ZARAKOL 2019).

A final group of studies of populism in Erdogan's foreign policy discourses comes to varying alternative conclusions. Taş (2022A) reveals the personalisation of foreign policy in Turkey by underlining the civilisational dimension in Erdogan's discourse. Drevet (2017) contends that Erdogan's populism is motivated by emotions and that he tends to ignore the consequences of his speech. According to Erçetin and Erdoğan (2023) insecurity, threat perception, victimisation, and scapegoating all contribute to group differentiation based on the us-versus-them narrative in Turkey, while Grigoriadis (2020) and Hisarciklioglu et al. (2022) conclude that Turkish foreign policy is politicised to create the traditional populist schisms between corrupt elites and pure people. Yesil (2020) explores how anti-elitism and nativism evolved into anti-Westernism in Turkey. Finally, Bulut and Hacıoğlu (2021) analyse the impact of populism as a communication style in inter-party contexts in Turkey, with a focus on foreign policy and religious symbolism.

Although previous research using Turkey as an empirical case has made substantial contributions to the populism literature, there are gaps, controversies, and limitations in the current knowledge. First, there is no consensus in the literature about a consistent ideological foundation. This brings up the question of whether ideology is a consistent variable for discursive populism in causal analysis. Second, much of the available work is limited to domestic sources and makes no assumptions about foreign policy dimensions. The scholars either interpret populism as a response to political and economic crises or take a bottom-up approach to populism by addressing social polarisation (secularist versus Islamist). In other words, they ignore the leader's role and impact in creating populist

themes through discursive tactics. Third, identity- and civilisation-related explanations do not offer much to explain either change or continuity in Turkish foreign policy. Hence, this analysis, which is original in terms of both research design and methodology, makes an important contribution to the literature.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Our analysis differs from the existing literature on populism in Turkey in terms of research design and methods. First, it analyses a large and unique dataset created by incorporating alternative sources neglected by prior research. Second, the use of thematic discourse analysis and empirical assessment helps clarify the nature and substance of Erdogan's populism, while also contributing to the contested and complex concept of populism in international politics. While scholars have been debating the impact, style, process, and pattern-types of populism in relation to foreign policy, the epistemology and ontology underlying populism's implications for foreign policy are still an under-researched area (TAŞ 2022A). That is why we have adopted thematic discourse analysis to analyse populist foreign policy discourse. As Alahou (2023) argues, thematic discourse analysis on a comprehensive scale is useful for determining the terms that dominate or support the overall work of a contested phenomenon. Moreover, identifying the themes by process-tracing allows us to locate the presuppositions that underpin populism and gain a better understanding of it through empirical assessment.

Our research design is heavily influenced by the models developed by Destradi et al. (2019, 2021, 2022), which allow for a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of populist themes in foreign policy. The first model developed by Destradi and Plagemann (2019) establishes three variables: "*i) more conflict-prone bilateral relations; ii) a weakening of global governance and its institutions; and iii) more centralised and personalised foreign policy-making.*" In a more recent model, Destradi, Cadier and Plagemann (2021) explain the interaction between populist discourses and foreign policy with four indicators: "*i) amenability to compromise; ii) bilateralism, multilateralism, and support for the EU and other international institutions; iii) diversification of foreign relationships; and iv) foreign policymaking: centralisation, personalisation, and communication.*"

TABLE 1: THEMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS RESEARCH CODEBOOK

Populist Themes	Code Names
Popular sovereignty	General will
From multilateralism to bilateralism	Bilateralism
Partnership diversification	Diversification
Construction of a new/strong Turkey	New Turkey
Anti-elitism	Anti-elitism
In-group mobilisation: nativism and conservative nationalism	Positive partisanship
Out-group bias: naming and shaming the opposition	Negative partisanship
People-centrism	People-centrism
Centralisation and personalisation	Personalisation

Their modelling forms the starting point of our research design. The nine unique codes (populist themes) for the thematic discourse analysis were initially chosen for the deductive codebook (Table 1). Because the study problematises populist themes in foreign policy discourses, thematic discourse analysis is employed as the research method. The thematic analysis allows for the identification and investigation of meaning patterns known as *themes* in discursive research (BRAUN ET AL. 2019).

The data sources for the analysis are extensive, as they include texts pertaining to election campaigns, media statements, party manifestos (JDP), and Erdogan's speeches as president in the Turkish parliament (TGNA) and as JDP leader at party group meetings (PGM), as well as statements by the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Directorate of Communication (DoC). The data cover the period from July 2016 to September 2022 based on the assumption that the 15 July failed coup attempt constituted a major turning point in Erdogan's leadership and foreign policy discourses.

With the assistance of a Ph.D. student, repeated readings of the documents ensured that the data's saturation point was sufficient. After we selected pertinent paragraphs using keywords, all the speeches and statements were compiled into 117 documents. A computer-aided program (Maxqda) was used for coding, with the paragraph serving as the unit of analysis. During the coding process, keywords associated with the populist themes were employed (see Appendix 1). For example, alternative powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, relations with non-Western

countries, and approaches to other regional projects were all considered as keywords of partnership diversification. Similarly, for the new Turkey theme, we identified terms referring to, for example, a new/strong(er) Turkey, a constructive and decisive country, foreign policy activism, a regional power/global actor, pro-activism, independence, Turkey-centrism, passivism and old syndromes, and the old Turkey. Indirect statements that did not contain keywords but featured populist themes in the spirit and meaning of the paragraph were included in the study, but labelled as indirect in the analysis.

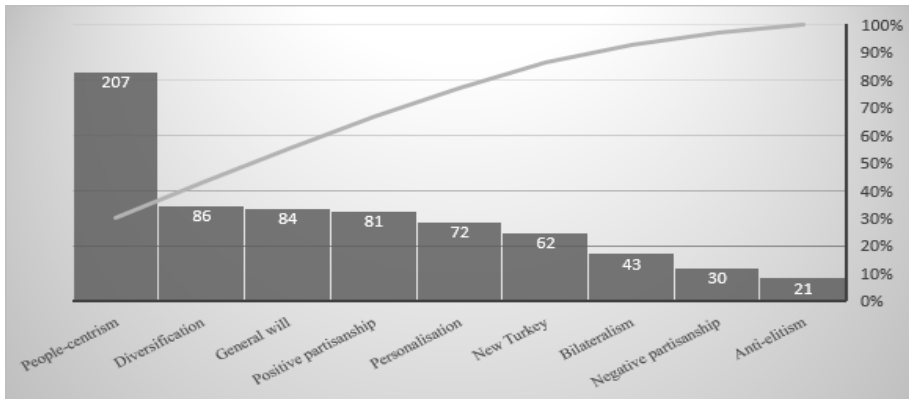
The article refers to populism as a *state of discourse* in foreign policy, but evaluating the centralisation and personalisation of foreign policy requires an analysis of the *state of behaviour*. The research acknowledges its limitations in this context; however, we focus on discourses as output, with the assumption that centralisation and personalisation have already existed in Turkish foreign policy at the time of the rise of populism (TAŞ 2022A). For this reason, the analysis compares the populist themes that emerged in the documents and statements of the relevant actors and institutions (the MFA, the DoC and the JDP) to the leaders' discourses to identify any fit/misfit (centralisation) at the discourse level. Correspondingly, the analysis considers Erdogan's explicit references to other political leaders (personal ties and meetings) and his use of undiplomatic language and social media to be indicators of personalisation in foreign policy.

The coding procedure was repeated for validity and reliability: 41 out of 686 codes were updated, yielding a consistency rate of 94%. Because some specific sources were in Turkish, some direct quotations were translated. Expert opinion was sought in cases of dispute. The selected coding for pertinent populist themes is available in Appendix 2. Although the analysis retained many qualitative characteristics, computer programs were used to perform a frequency analysis, a Pareto analysis, a code co-occurrence model, and a word cloud. The frequency analysis reveals the general distribution of populist themes and their distribution in the alternative data sources; the code co-occurrence model allows for identifying inter-related themes; and the word cloud tells us which international actors appear most often in the discourses.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

With regard to the frequency distributions of the codes (Figure 1), people-centrism (207), diversification (86), general will (84), positive partisanship (81) and personalisation (72) appear to be the leading populist themes. According to the Pareto analysis, four of the nine codes in the codebook yield no relevant findings. Anti-elitism, negative partisanship, bilateralism, and the new Turkey are insignificant and irrelevant at the 80% level. Given the evident weight of people-centrism, as well as general will and personalisation, it is clear that populist foreign policy rhetoric is politicised to enhance the leader’s image. This finding is significant because it demonstrates how “us versus them” populist thinking (people-centrism and general will) has morphed into a cult of the leader and a personalisation tendency in foreign policy. The qualitative study of Erdogan’s foreign policy discourse reveals that relevant populist themes aim at projecting the image of a strong and charismatic leader as the representation of the will of oppressed people(s). Partnership diversification (86) and positive partisanship (81) have little impact on his populist foreign policy discourse.

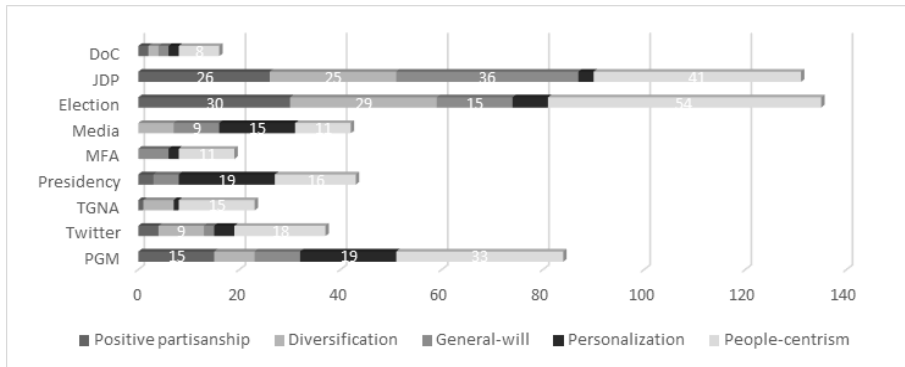
FIGURE 1: CODEBOOK FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION AND PARETO ANALYSIS



When the distribution of the codes is analysed in different data sources (Figure 2), populist motifs emerge mainly in election speeches, party documents and party group meetings. This result demonstrates how Erdogan’s status as party leader shapes populist discourses more intensely. The second-highest-frequency group includes his declarations and speeches in the media, in the presidency and on Twitter as president.

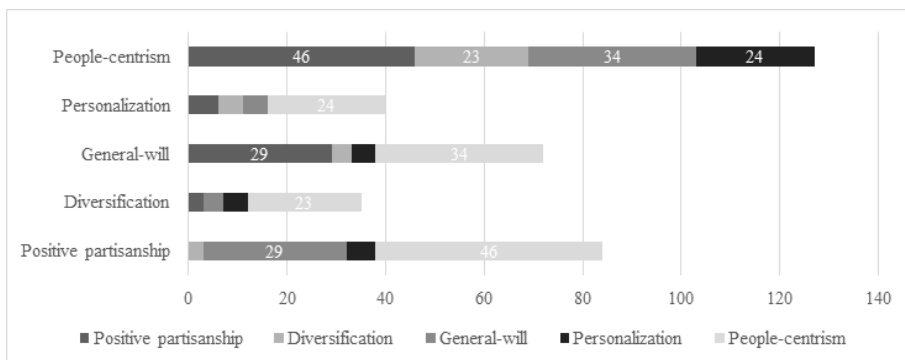
The DoC, the MFA and his speeches as president in parliament are less relevant arenas of populist discourse. The code distribution among alternative actors suggests a discursive amount of centralisation in foreign policy. People-centrism is the defining populist motif in the MFA, JDP and DoC declarations. This quantitative finding demonstrates that relevant domestic institutions collaborate with leader discourses to enhance the leadership domain.

FIGURE 2: CODE DISTRIBUTION ACROSS ALTERNATIVE DATA SOURCES



The code co-occurrence model presented in Figure 3 also reveals the prominent role of people-centrism in the populist foreign policy discourse. People-centrism is the theme that co-occurs the most with all the other themes, as it co-occurs with personalisation 24 times, with general will 34 times, with diversification 23 times, and with positive partisanship 46 times. In other words, other populist themes include components of people-centrism, which confirms our main conclusion.

FIGURE 3: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF CODE CO-OCCURRENCES



REPRESENTING THE WILL OF OPPRESSED PEOPLE(S): PEOPLE-CENTRISM, GENERAL WILL AND PERSONALISATION

The JDP, which describes itself as a conservative democratic mass party of the centre (of the ideological spectrum), claims to be the insurance of Turkey's unity and integrity with the help of civilisational values based on national will. The ruling party explains its people-centric ideas in its 2023 Political Vision ^(AK PARTI 2023) thus: *"Because we have a vision of a great and powerful Turkey. Our passion is Turkey, and our foundation is the country. Our nation, which we serve, is the wellspring of our legitimacy and authority."* The JDP claims to have implemented a foreign policy that has eliminated the symptoms that undermined the nation's self-confidence. Since then, they argue, they have prioritised EU membership to achieve the universal principles that the Turkish people deserve.

By referring to civilisation, Erdogan positions himself as the real representative of the people's rights and interests in foreign policy, which underpin his leadership and aim to resurrect the Turkish civilisation. According to him, Turkey has thousands of years of a strong state tradition and a strong cultural heritage behind it, an unbreakable national unity, and solidarity. By referring to Turkishness, Erdogan's foreign policy discourses declare his ambition for Turkey to become an adequate regional power: *"In this great geography, Turk is the name of a civilisation, not a tribe. That is why, at every opportunity, we say Turkey, Turkish nation. Today, we are attempting to resurrect this great civilisation and make it long-awaited throughout the world"* ^(ERDOGAN 2019A).

Erdoga's Manichean and moralistic worldview appears in his emotional interpretation of foreign policy based on the cruel versus the oppressed, an indicator of personalisation through simplification: *"Our values support our claim that Turkey is the hope of oppressed peoples, the guardian of innocents, and the key to a solution"* ^(ERDOGAN 2021). Being the voice of the oppressed is portrayed first as a mission to actualise divine justice, and second, as necessitated by the Turks' ancient past. In fact, Erdogan ^(2019A) claims, *"Wherever you go in Ottoman geography today, my brothers, you will see a sparkle of love, respect, and affection in people's eyes when Turks are mentioned."* Regarding the Syrian crisis and refugee burden, for example,

Erdogan ^(2020A) states: *“Turkey is a country that has embraced every oppressed person who has come to its door over the years and has kept four million people alive on its territory by providing all kinds of humanitarian aid and support.”*

People-centrism in Erdogan's populist discourse encompasses not only the true representation of Turks living in Turkey, but also the rights and interests of sister and related communities in neighbouring regions. Erdogan frequently appeals to the Ottoman heritage of the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia for this purpose and, more specifically, promotes the rights and interests of Turkish or Muslim relatives and kin groups. Each year, he expresses his sorrow for the Srebrenica Genocide, which immediately leads into his discussions of current situations, such as those in Crimea, Palestine and Myanmar. Erdogan ^(2017A) is the voice and leader not only of Turks, but also of all oppressed people (nearly all Muslims) in the lands of the shared ancestral heritage: *“How can we say that the developments in Libya, where our brothers and sisters with love for Turkey engraved in their hearts, do not concern us? How can we ignore the events in Yemen, for which we sing folk songs? How can we see Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, where our ancestors left their mark on every corner, as the other? How can we abandon the oppressed people in Arakan, Turkestan and Crimea? How can we leave our brothers in the Gulf alone with the crises they are experiencing? When you go to the geography we call the Middle East, for example, when you look at Jerusalem, many of the silhouettes you see are heirlooms of our ancestors.”*

Simplicity and emotionalisation, as characteristic reflections of personalisation, find a place in Erdogan's discourses, with the support of historical motifs and identity politics. Erdogan has increased his anti-Western rhetoric and aggressive tone, claiming that the rising anti-Islamism in the West has turned into an all-out assault on their valued religious beliefs ^(CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI 2020). According to him, Europe died in Bosnia and was buried in Syria; the bodies of innocent children washed up on the beach are Western civilisation's tombstones ^(CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI 2017). During elections, Erdogan often addresses Turks residing in Europe, supporting their rights and freedoms and urging them to vote. The JDP leader claims to be the voice of the continent's oppressed Turkish and Muslim immigrants: *“While attacks on Muslim places of worship and workplaces have become an increasingly common event, violations of migrants' rights are overlooked. Unfortunately,*

European politics is captivated by far-right movements and a hate language [that grows] more powerful each day” (ERDOGAN 2019B).

Erdogan’s foreign policy discourses demand equal relations with partners and highlight the values of mutual respect and non-intervention (general will). In this regard, sovereignty is a priority for the JDP, which claims its foundational purpose is “*to protect and maintain the country and state of the nation, and the independence and unitary structure of the State*” (AK PARTI 2012). The party believes that territorial integrity and sovereignty is a right that should be respected and protected by international organisations. Thus, relations with the EU are framed as seeking strategic aims based on mutual respect and equality on a win-win basis (ERDOGAN 2017B). His discussions of popular sovereignty primarily bring up the debate on the death penalty, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Turkey’s anti-terrorism agenda. Referring to the general will (expressed by a referendum and/or a parliamentary resolution), Erdogan argues that the reinstatement of the death penalty is the Turkish people’s natural right. He depicts the European Parliament’s criticisms as an intervention in Turkey’s domestic affairs, and a clash with its sovereignty (DW 2016). Similarly, Turkey interprets the developments in Cyprus as a violation of equal treatment, with claims that a small group of Turkey’s antagonists in the EU disregard Turkey’s and Turkish Cypriots’ rights (MFA 2021). Turkey repeats that the EU depends on inconsistent and biased arguments, and is a foreign-control mechanism and a device of Greek and Greek Cypriot interests.

Erdogan’s exclusive nationalist rhetoric and image of the EU as an enemy threatening Turkey’s unity and territorial integrity are developed indirectly. He constantly complains about violations of the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* and double standards and criticises *some Western/European states* for their hesitant tactics in the battle against terrorist organisations (FETO, PYD/PKK, Daesh). He accuses some Western powers of attempting to act in Turkey through terrorist organisations, and he blames other partners for failing to express solidarity with Turkey and remaining silent. He claims these plots have been foiled thanks to the Turks’ historical national pride: “*The reality is that the issue is not DAESH or even the PKK, but the implementation of a project directed primarily at our region. [...] At this point, we had two options: either succumb to the role allocated to us in this drama created in Europe and America, accept what had happened to us*

and what was to come, and submit our necks to the butcher knife, or we could fight. In Turkey's and the Turkish nation's history, capitulation has never been an option. We did what was necessary; we raised the flag of struggle alongside our nation. Nothing else would suit a nation that has formed its state by saying either independence or death" (ERDOGAN 2019C).

Erdogan promotes his strong leadership image through Twitter (now X), using it as a communication tool in diplomacy, and making public announcements of his meetings with other leaders (some as friends, some as foes). His international visits, attendance at summits (such as the G20 and NATO summits) and conversations with foreign leaders all contribute to Erdogan's image as a respected world leader. Erdogan, like other populist politicians, uses Twitter to communicate his foreign policy objectives and highlight his high-level international contacts: *"Aside from my regular contacts, I met with the President of France, who holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU, [and] the Prime Ministers of Italy, Estonia, Spain and the UK"* (ERDOGAN 2022).

Erdogan, who reduces relationships to the leader's diplomacy and individualises them, does not hesitate to use undiplomatic language. As a nod to his supporters' campaign mottoes *"Stand tall, do not bow! The people are with you!"*, Erdogan exclaims to Europe, *"O, West[Eyy Batı]!"*. He particularly targets French and Greek politicians for personalisation. He urges Emmanuel Macron to consider his country's colonial history, bringing up the Algerian genocide and encouraging the international community to oppose Macron's anti-Islam agenda. He accuses German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy of breaking their promises on visa liberalisation, counterterrorism, negotiation chapters and the refugee crisis (REUTERS 2017). He argues similarly about the Greek Cypriots' accession to EU membership. Erdogan routinely attacks Greek leaders for their policies on refugees, equating the related humanitarian catastrophe and Greek policy with World War II and Nazi torture. Erdogan (2017B) even sees the increasing populism in Europe as an enormous threat to the EU: *"Without a doubt, the most serious threat facing the future of the Union is to let exclusionist discourses be a means of populist policies. Such social diseases as discrimination, cultural racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia are unfortunately becoming widespread across the continent."*

While Erdogan refers to the former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the German politician Günter Verheugen, and the Russian President Vladimir Putin as valuable and sympathetic friends in his discourses, he employs the names of US presidents in a more neutral sense. Erdogan frequently characterises European leaders as having negative qualities such as a lack of character, insincerity, dishonesty, and multifacetedness, and as having failed the leadership test. When he raises his voice, he does not hesitate to scream, “They are colonialists committing crimes, they are (neo-)Nazis, and they are jealous!”

PARTNERSHIP DIVERSIFICATION AND POSITIVE PARTISANSHIP HAVE A LIMITED PRESENCE

While the populist themes of people-centrism, general will, and personalisation marginalise the EU and generate negative content in Erdogan’s discourse, the fourth populist theme, partnership diversification, produces a more flexible vocabulary. The JDP promotes both change and continuity in foreign policy by adding a Eurasian direction to Turkey’s traditional Euro-Atlantic dimension (AK PARTI 2002: 109). It lists its core foreign policy principles as “*zero problems with neighbours, security for all, economic integration, multiculturalism, and living together in peace*” (AK PARTI 2023). In addition to the EU and NATO, Erdogan prioritises relations with the United Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Organisation of Turkic States, the Economic Cooperation Organisation, the G20 Summit, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC), the Shanghai Five, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

Turkey’s geographical position – neighbouring the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus – is an important factor in terms of Turkey diversifying its foreign policy partners to become a regional power. Erdogan frequently highlights Turkey’s foreign policy activism in neighbouring regions as a complement to the EU rather than an alternative to it (ERDOGAN 2018). However, his supportive statements on the EU membership process are conditional – “*But nobody should forget that Turkey always has many other alternatives*” (EURACTIV 2016) – and sometimes more hostile – “*Turkey does not need to join the EU at ‘all costs’ and could instead*

become part of a security bloc dominated by China, Russia, and Central Asian nations” (REUTERS 2016).

For Erdogan, foreign policy change and partnership diversification are not a choice but a necessity, for various reasons. First, Turkey’s immediate neighbours are depicted as *Ottoman* and part of a very close network of historical, cultural and social connections with Turkey. The glorification of Turkish history leads Erdogan to frame Turkey’s foreign policy activism as its historical responsibility. Second, given Turkey’s geopolitical position and its east–west and north–south hinterlands, partnership diversification is considered a geographical necessity. Third, drawing attention to the end of the Cold War enables Erdogan to reiterate the opportunities and advantages that originated from the new world order. Finally, foreign policy diversification is associated with Turkey’s foreign economic relations, particularly with international projects such as the Turkey–Africa summits, the Silk Road, the Caspian East–West Central Corridor Initiative and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway. The following statement in the JDP Party Program summarises its perspective on foreign policy: “*The post-Cold War dynamic conjuncture has produced an appropriate climate for building a multi-alternative foreign policy. In this new environment, Turkey must reorganise and forge alternative, flexible, and multi-axis ties with the centres of power. Our party will pursue a realistic foreign policy that is consistent with Turkey’s history and geographical situation, devoid of prejudices and obsessions, and based on mutual interests*” (AK PARTI 2002: 105).

FIGURE 4: WORD CLOUD FOR FOREIGN ACTORS



Designed at <https://wordart.com/>.

Erdogan's foreign policy agenda most prominently features Syria in relation to the EU (Figure 4): Turkey has criticised the EU and its member states for failing to provide adequate support for refugees displaced by the Syrian crisis, the battle against terrorism (DAESH and PKK/PYD) and Turkey's military activities in northern Syria. The most prevalent – and largely unfavourable – content relating to EU member countries is with regard to Greece, Cyprus, and sometimes Germany. Iraq, Russia and Libya are vital concerns for Turkey, as are relations with the United States and NATO. Finally, Africa and Asia receive some attention as arenas for foreign policy activism.

Following the failed 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan's discourses revealed a threat perception and a strong securitisation rhetoric. They evolved into speech acts using the word *survival* to mobilise voters, particularly during election campaigns. Although the EU is not directly addressed in the content of his securitisation discourses, certain Western powers are marked as enemies by him. Based on threat perception and security agendas, the JDP leader employs a positive partisanship strategy with a negative identification method. The politician emphasises that Turkey is facing international sieges, imperialism and threats of an embargo (on economic and military technology) from the West. Global enemies attempt to carry out operations in Turkey through terrorist organisations and separatist approaches to foreign policy. Alluding to these challenges, particularly during election campaigns, Erdogan attributes political, economic, and social crises to a global focus: the Gezi Park protests, the economic crisis, the failed coup attempt and Syria.

Erdogan's framework, threat perception and security agenda necessitate a domestic mobilisation. As a projection of the dominant and collective worldview, he underlines the need for unity and solidarity: "*It is forbidden for us to stop or rest until Turkey reaches its goals. In times of struggle, 83 million of us are one; we are together, #TogetherTurkey, we are strong together*" (ERDOGAN 2020B). Appealing to the urgent need for a spirit of majoritarian collectivism, nativism, and national mobilisation, a famous slogan is chanted in the election squares: *One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state*. In Erdogan's 2018 post-election balcony speech his language is typical for him: "*You were with us during the Gezi protests, the police–judiciary coup*

attempt on December 17-25, and the presidential election. We worked together to repel vandals and shady gangs. You supported us during the 2015 elections, particularly on November 1. We taught those who were wringing their hands and waiting for Turkey to kneel a lesson” (ANADOLU AJANSI 2018).

In Erdogan's speeches, the positive mobilisation of *us* is built on two ideological devices: Turkishness and Islam. Turkishness is extolled in chauvinistic language, with allusions to military and historical events. Turkish culture is portrayed as a bastion of civilisation. Erdogan, as the religious leader, frequently employs Islamic analogies to express his thankfulness to Allah. He paints himself as the protector of the Islamic prophet and his legacy and claims solidarity with oppressed Muslim peoples (in Palestine, Myanmar, and the Balkans), whom he names as *brothers*. He calls on Turkish communities, particularly those in Europe, to protect and maintain their languages and religion. His positive partisanship combines Turkishness with Islam.

CONCLUSION

The reflection of populism in foreign policy is an emerging research subject, and its conceptual, analytical, and methodological structuring is at an early stage. Using thematic discourse analysis, this study explores the populist themes that developed in Erdogan's foreign policy discourses in the context of Turkey–EU relations. Relevant declarations, statements and speeches made between July 2016 and September 2022 were gathered from numerous data sources. Using computer-aided software, they were compared across different populist themes. The large and unique dataset, previously unexplored in the literature on the Turkish case, reveals two methodological implications. First, statements made by Erdogan as a *party leader* have a significant impact on his populist discourse. Party documents and his statements during elections and at party group meetings provide more opportunities to examine his populist themes. Second, foreign policy organisations, such as the MFA and the DoC, are valuable for analysing Erdogan's populist discourse. The parallelism and compatibility between his populism and the relevant organisations in Turkey support the diagnosis of a trend toward centralisation and personalisation of Turkish foreign policy.

Erdogan's foreign policy discourses are designed to portray him as the true representative of the people's rights and interests. The most vital populist motif, people-centrism, is employed to strengthen Erdogan's image as the nation's leader. The essence of populism, namely the people versus the elite, emerged clearly from the examination of the first pillar, the "people". Erdogan employs populist discourses on foreign policy to foster a cult of real leadership. His populism reinforces his role as the voice of the people by emphasising not only people-centrism, but also the general will and personalisation as prominent themes in his speech. Erdogan's discursive populism shows how the populist worldview of us versus them (people-centrism and the general will) may be politicised to further the cult of the leader and the personalisation tendency in foreign policy.

Erdogan, who bases Turkey's relations with the EU on symmetric and equal relations founded on mutual respect, prioritises the general will in his speeches through the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention in domestic matters, particularly in relation to elections and referendums. He values leader-to-leader diplomacy, and engages in personal polemics against Greek and French leaders, calling their leadership into question. This decisive conclusion verifies populist claims about the incentives of strong leadership. Ideology, domestic political motives and international-level explanations have no significant causal impact on his instrumentalisation of populist foreign policy discourse. Erdogan's populism serves the same objective as the personality cult. Our results are consistent with previous similar findings by Taş (2022A) and Eksi and Wood (2019). The research findings are not unexpected. However, none of the prior analyses handled the subject using such a multidimensional scale; our results therefore suggest that even on a more encompassing scale, these populist elements remain outlying themes in Erdogan's discourse.

Our findings on the ideological underpinning of Erdogan's populism are notably different from those of the existing literature. First, the ideology variable, which is elsewhere defined as an independent source of populism, appears in our analysis to reinforce the notion of the leadership being the voice of the people (people-centrism). In other words, ideology has a place as long as it helps to shape the leader's image without directly being the source of populism. Hence both religious and national identities are combined, defining not only the people, but also the nation's leader,

who is safeguarding the rights and interests of Turks and Muslims across borders, including immigrants in Europe. Secondly, contrary to the nationalism/ Islamism divide discussed in the literature, Erdogan has recently emerged as the proponent of a third way: a Turkish–Islamic synthesis. It is clear from the discourses that “us versus them” is built through a more intensified Turkish–Islamic conjunction. Erdogan’s Eurosceptic rhetoric reflects a continuation of the Islamist Welfare Party; to that he has added Turkish nationalism as an ideological foundation.

Erdogan upholds Turkey’s traditional line in foreign policy, although he emphasises the populist themes of partnership diversification in terms of revisionism in foreign policy. His discourses reflect assertions of intention regarding the development of relations with the EU – but with a footnote stating that membership is not an indispensable goal. Although the traditional Euro-Atlantic approach still exists, Eurasianism has become prominent in discussions of history, geography, political economy, and the emerging international order. In this framework, largely positive discourses considering the significance of relations with neighbouring regions and alternative powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, are formed.

It is difficult to generalise the conclusion regarding the domestication of populist foreign policy agendas. Although the domestic dimension of populism is neither decisive nor relevant in Erdogan’s discourses, two exceptions appear. First, when he targets voters during election campaigns, the JDP leader instrumentalises Turkey’s relations with the EU and the foreign policy agenda. The gap between “us” and outsiders becomes more evident, and the tone rises during election campaigns. Second, Erdogan advocates domestic unity against the operations of destructive Western forces. Based on threat perception and securitising discourses, the strategy of positive partisanship works as a survival speech act for political competition.

Turkey–EU ties are centred on foreign and security policy, which we might classify as high politics, and extend beyond the agenda specified for candidate states (the Copenhagen criteria). Syria is at the top of Erdogan’s agenda as an issue of concern. The EU’s vague and contradictory approach to it is criticised by him, and Greece in particular is singled out for blame for the Syrian refugee crisis. Again, he also criticises the West for

its hostile or unsupportive attitudes and policies in the fight against terrorist organisations (Daesh, PKK/PYD, and FETO). Aside from Syria, the 2016 failed military coup, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Cyprus problem also dominate Turkey's foreign policy agenda with the EU.

Populist foreign policy as a new field of research is controversial and context-dependent. This in-depth analysis, based on the model by Destradi et al. (2019, 2021, 2022), leads to certain theoretical and methodological recommendations. First, certain themes make it difficult to incorporate the concept of populism into foreign policy discourse at the leader level. For example, the contrast between the general will and people-centrism is ambiguous; alternatively, in issue/actor-based assessments, the themes of bilateralism and partnership diversification necessitate an examination of the major pillars of foreign policy. As a result, rather than attempting to create a generic framework for populism in foreign policy, alternative models can be established that incorporate flexibility while taking actor, time, target audience, and agenda factors into account. Second, future studies and research can consider the function and position of the actor who produces populist speech. The study's findings and conclusions reveal a substantial gap between Erdogan's roles as head of the executive and as party leader. Accordingly, populism studies should interact with other disciplines and research fields, particularly the literature on authoritarianism and leadership styles. Third, there is a need for further analysis and enquiry into the methodological framework of populism research, particularly data collection; in our research, several datasets provided in the literature had no effect on the analysis, such as those drawn from Twitter and parliamentary speeches. Finally, because centralisation and personalisation of foreign policy need an examination of states of behaviour rather than states of discourse, new operationalisation styles are required for populist foreign policy discourse research.

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