



## From De-Europeanisation to Anti-Western Populism: Turkish Foreign Policy in Flux

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### ABSTRACT

Recent Turkish foreign policy (TFP) under the successive AKP governments has seen different populist turns. A clear distinction can be made between the thin and thick populisms of TFP, based on the status of the West. The first decade of AKP rule, when foreign policy was thinly populist, was characterised by steady de-Europeanisation, increasing engagement with regional issues and a decentring of Turkey's Western orientation. The turn toward thick populism has been characterised by anti-Westernist discourses in which the West is resituated as the 'other' of Turkish political identity.

### KEYWORDS

Turkish foreign policy;  
populism; populist foreign  
policy; anti-Westernism

Turkish foreign policy (TFP) has been subject to dramatic changes under the successive Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) governments, which have been in power since 2002. Whatever its content, objectives and formulation, foreign policy has always been domesticated by the AKP leaders as an issue of crucial importance to consolidate their position within Turkey's internal power politics. As populist tendencies have increasingly characterised the AKP rule, foreign policy has become one of the main discursive fields in which domestic power struggles have played out and the country's Kemalist past has increasingly been problematised. Eventually, this tendency has become an integral part of the AKP's conservative social engineering efforts and the main hallmark of its populism, with a range of significant political and economic implications.

As some observers argue, unlike certain countries such as India, where there has been a "clear-cut transition from a non-populist to a populist leader" (Plagemann and Destradi 2018, 284), in Turkey this transition has occurred gradually over the course of the AKP's rule. Similarly, the populist transformation in foreign policy has occurred over time and may well be examined in two distinct eras: those of thin and thick populism.<sup>1</sup> While in the first era populist discourse could be observed only as an occasional and marginal element, in the second era, it has become the core, if not the defining component of foreign policymaking in Turkey.

The thin populist turn manifested itself as an assertive regionalism often legitimised and popularised through 'neo-Ottomanist' discourses and imagery. Throughout the first decade of AKP rule, security interests and threat perceptions took on an increasingly regional

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<sup>1</sup>Our distinction between thin and thick populism is related to the degree populism penetrates foreign policy discourse and making in Turkey. This should not be confused with Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-centered ideology".

character in Turkey, and Turkey defined itself as an activist regional power. As previously discussed elsewhere (Kaliber 2013), the implications of regionalisation in Turkish foreign policy may well be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s, when the Cold War security architecture changed dramatically. The end of global bipolar rivalry provided some leeway for mid-size regional powers, including Turkey, to engage more actively in regional security institutions, issues and challenges. Freed from the restrictions inherent in being a loyal member of one of the poles, Turkey wanted to open up new spaces for its redefined and widened foreign policy agenda (Kaliber 2013).

Yet it was in the 2000s, in the early years of the AKP governments, that regionalist activism became the main component of Turkish foreign and security policy. This study argues that the regionalist TFP discourses that arose in that decade became increasingly dominant in parallel to the crystallisation of the populist streak in foreign policy. Turkey's region-focused activism in the 2000s drew on the construction of a particular foreign policy identity that defined Turkey as a peace-promoting soft power bearing the capacity for "instituting order" (Davutoğlu 2009) in its surrounding regions, namely the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. "Marked by the downturn in EU-Turkey relations and the growing disenchantment by both sides" (Aydın-Düzgüt and Kaliber 2016, 1), this era was also characterised by a steady de-Europeanisation<sup>2</sup> of TFP and problematisation of the conventional, deep-seated Kemalist<sup>3</sup> foreign policymaking and identity.

However, as a result of a process that began with the Gezi Park protests of 2013 and was particularly pronounced immediately following the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016, TFP has undergone a more radical recalibration characterised mainly by the re-inscription of the West as the 'other' of Turkey. In fact, the critical transition from thin to thick populism may well be traced back to the AKP's landslide victory in Turkey's parliamentary elections in 2011, and the beginning of the events dubbed the 'Arab Spring' the same year. Yet, it has been in the post-2013 era that the de-Europeanising dynamics in Turkish foreign policy discourse have been systematically replaced by a vehement anti-Westernism, which has come to be the main tenet of the era of thick populism in TFP.

This foreign policy discourse has set the "essentially different and morally higher Islamic" (Alaranta 2015, 31) Turkish self against the essentially inferior and threatening Western other. In this discourse widely disseminated by current Turkish policymakers and most notably President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as pro-government commentators, academics and activists, the West essentially represents the opposite other of the East in the contemporary global power struggle. Turkey, belonging to the Eastern civilisation, has been "waging a second war of independence against the West" (Gül 2016; *TRT Haber* 2016). The foreign policy discourse in which Turkey has been encircled by "diverse terrorist groups supported by the Western states" (*Al Jazeera* 2016; Karagül 2016) securitises<sup>4</sup> the West as either an unfriendly or inimical power threatening the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

<sup>2</sup>De-Europeanisation is broadly defined as the loss or weakening of the impact of the European Union (EU)/Europe as a normative/political context for TFP.

<sup>3</sup>Kemalism can be defined as the state ideology of the Turkish Republic named after its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

<sup>4</sup>The concepts of securitisation and de-securitisation were introduced by the Copenhagen School. Securitisation is defined as a speech act whereby issues political in nature are classified as existential threats "requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure". Desecuritisation refers to moving "issues out from the threat-defense sequence into the ordinary public sphere". See Buzan *et al.* (1998, 24, 26 and 29) and Kaliber (2005).

Methodologically, this research relies mainly on conventional discourse analysis of statements by a variety of policy elites in Turkey, most notably President Erdoğan, in the post-2013 era with a view to addressing two issues: first, the ways in which they perceive and construct Turkey's relations with European and/or Western countries; and second, the extent to which anti-Westernism has shaped patterns of populism in TFP. Speeches, statements, press releases and declarations of AKP cadres have been carefully selected to represent some common argumentative threads constituting the populist patterns in TFP.

Against this background, this article proceeds as follows. It first critically engages with the recently growing literature on populism and foreign policy with a view to grasping its potentials and limitations. The article then elaborates on the distinction it makes between the thin and thick populisms of foreign policy in Turkey. When examining the thinly populist era, the emphasis will be placed on its instrumentalisation in domestic power politics by Turkish governments, against the opposition accused of being representatives of 'the old Turkey'. The subsequent section of the article focuses on the thick populism of the AKP's foreign policy characterised by a vehement anti-Westernism, through which the superior Islamic Turkish self is constructed against the inferior Western other.

### **Populism in foreign policy**

Populism as an "anti-elitist, anti-pluralist" political movement with authoritarian and nativist tendencies (Mudde 2007) has been on the rise not only in established Western democracies, but also in hybrid and authoritarian regimes such as Turkey, India, Thailand, the Philippines and Venezuela (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004 and 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). In tandem with the erosion of liberal democracy, the revival of the national security state in the post 9-11 era and the rise of emergency practices by states, it has become a constituent of "a new broader global political reality that cuts across geographic, economic, and political boundaries" (Aydın-Düzgit and Keyman 2017, 5).

A commonality of populist movements in both established democracies and hybrid or authoritarian regimes is that they are based on an image of society consisting of two homogenous and polarised blocs: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'. These are essentialised as necessarily opposed and even antagonistic categories and populists present themselves as representing the former against the latter. Their policies and discourses on issues of domestic and international politics are shaped by how these categories are defined – who is to be included in each category or which domestic and foreign policy actions will be deemed in favour of or against the national will. As Taggart (2000) suggests, populist parties' definition of the people to be protected and the corrupt elites or institutions to be opposed often differ in accordance with the specific circumstances of local contexts and the thicker ideologies to which these populists attach themselves, that is, socialism or liberalism. To elucidate, in Latin America "left-wing populists such as Morales define the pure people by encompassing indigenous people and by excluding from their identity any links with the old (European) colonising powers or the newer imperialism of United States" (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, 393). Similarly, for the Chavezian tradition, the segments of the Venezuelan society who are loyal to the Bolivarian revolutionary movement constitute the pure people, while the elites are claimed to be serving American interests (Thies 2017).

It is widely acknowledged that the resurgence of populism deeply influences and is, in turn, influenced by the outcomes and processes of international politics. Yet, the literature on populism has often tended to see the issue mainly “as a phenomenon of domestic politics” (Chrysosgelos 2017, 2). Such crucial questions as whether there is any such thing as populist foreign policy, and if so, what constitute its common and dissimilar threads in the Western and non-Western contexts, remain largely underexplored.

Scholars studying populism converge on the idea that populist governments do not “pursue identical foreign policies” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, 384; see also Verbeek and Zaslove 2019, 14). The content of populist foreign policy will differ depending on populist parties’ ideologies and their ability to influence foreign policymaking processes: “The ideological variability of populist parties and movements is too big and their capacity to influence foreign policy also varies” (Chrysosgelos 2017, 14) across countries. Thus, the relevant literature on the issue does not have an established definition of what makes a foreign policy populist, indicating a need for a systematic treatment of the implications of populism on states’ foreign policies as well as on relations between such states.

The burgeoning literature on populism and foreign policy is “mostly based on insights from single case studies and also has a clearly Eurocentric or ‘Western’ bias” (Plagemann and Destradi 2018, 286), with a few notable exceptions (Dodson and Dorraj 2008; Phongpaichit and Baker 2008; Fraser 2017; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Chrysosgelos 2017; Aytaç and Öniş 2014). It often focuses on partisan foreign policy positions and suggests that rightwing populist parties advocate nativism, strict control on immigration, consolidation of national sovereignty, and rejection of globalisation in economic and cultural terms. Leftwing populist parties, on the other hand, are identified with opposition to neoliberalism and open markets, as well as with anti-Americanism and suspicion towards institutions of global governance (Chrysosgelos 2017, 1). While this holds true for European cases, a more nuanced and comprehensive approach is needed in examining populist foreign policies in the non-West. The lack of cross-national studies seems to lead solely to context-bound explanations and “ad hoc theorising on the basis of single case studies” (Kaltwasser *et al.* 2017, 2). Hence, there is a pressing need for a more systematic, theory-driven and cross-regional comparative analysis of the patterns of populist foreign policy in both Western and non-Western contexts.

The literature on populism in foreign policy often draws on the Realist International Relations (IR) tradition and its approach to foreign policy, envisaging a categorical distinction between the domestic and the international realms of politics. In this conception, foreign policy refers to internally mediated responses of states “to the externally induced situation of ideological, military, and economic threats” (Campbell 1998, 36). Yet, a variety of critical works, and post-positivist scholarship on IR in particular, have shown that these realms are “thoroughly interconnected and mutually constituted” (Hobson 2002, 16). Some students of populism acknowledge that the domestic/international distinction has increasingly become blurred and meaningless: “Domestic events spill over into the international contexts, while international events affect domestic affairs” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, 384). Yet, in this conception, the domestic and the international are still constructed as co-existing and interacting, but separate realms of politics. It is suggested that populist parties and leaders pursue a specific foreign policy reflecting their domestic identities, “preferences and values” (Chrysosgelos 2017, 14). For example, Özkeçeci-Taner (2009) explains the

foreign policy positions of different political parties in Turkey as extensions of their specific domestic political identities, such as nationalism and Islamism.

Nevertheless, this strand of literature largely overlooks the constitutive role of foreign policy in the domestic realm, particularly in relation to its implications in the internal power/domination relations. Populist foreign policy discourses are inherent in the reproduction of domestic identities. They have a fundamental and constitutive role in the reproduction of the distinction between us and them, the pure people and the corrupt elite, the legitimate and the illegitimate, the national and the non-national. Hence, the scholarly research on foreign policy and populism needs to speak to the post-positivist accounts of foreign policy as “boundary producing” (Campbell 1998, 62), disciplinary and securitising practices integral to the constitution and reproduction of domestic national identities and their others.<sup>5</sup>

### Populism in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP

Despite some limitations, the recent scholarly reflection on populist foreign policy still offers valuable insights (Chrysosgelos 2017, 1) for understanding relevant patterns. Populist regimes often exhibit similar traits in the formulation, narration and communication of their foreign policies from which we can identify at least some common characteristics. Indeed, Turkey exhibits some similarities with cases from the global South, including India and Venezuela. For instance, populist leaders often explicitly target established foreign policy bureaucracies as elitist structures symbolising the *ancien régime*. That is what happened in both Turkey and India after populist governments came to power (Plagemann and Destradi 2018). At the discursive level, the similarities of the populist streak in Turkish foreign policy with the other cases from the global South are even more manifest. A strong emphasis on popular will and national sovereignty, a vehement anti-Westernism under the guise of anti-imperialism or anti-Americanism, a distrust towards or even securitisation of international institutions as threats to national security and the rediscovery of the glorious past with the aim of justifying the promised great power status in global politics can be seen as some of the common themes of populist foreign policy discourses in various cases, particularly from the non-West.

This article makes a distinction between two populist eras in Turkey’s recent foreign policymaking. In the first or thinly populist era, some of these discourses were either absent or weakly articulated under the guise of regionalist activism. Populist foreign policy discourses were instrumentalised to project an image of Turkey as a multi-regional player to domestic and international audiences, and thus were often overshadowed by an assertive regionalism. Europe featured among these various regions and as the impact of populism strengthened, the influence of Europeanisation on TFP weakened. But the then foreign policy establishment defended the idea that Turkey distanced itself not from the West, but from Western-centrism. The Western or the European were designated as complementary to the Turkish identity, but not as its other.

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<sup>5</sup>For a detailed discussion on the role of foreign policy in the constitution of the national self and its other/others, see Kaliber (2019).

In the second period, populist discourses and actions have held sway over the ways in which foreign policies are formulated, discursively framed and communicated in Turkey. In this era of thick populism, the image of Turkey having strong ties with several regions simultaneously and fusing its Islamic and modern identities has been replaced by a vehement anti-Westernism as the hallmark of foreign policy populism. The Islamic Turkish self has been redefined in relation to its difference from the West, which has been essentialised as the inimical other of Turkey. Rather than serving as a means of foreign policy, populism has turned out to be the main premise of TFP in this era.

Since there are both continuities and discontinuities between these two periods, before examining the current anti-Westernist populism of TFP it will be useful to elaborate on how and in what ways the West was positioned in the first thin populism period of TFP.

### ***Thin populism in Turkish foreign policy***

In the first, thin populist era of TFP, the AKP governments adopted a region-focused activism in foreign policymaking and discourse, drawing on such concepts as 'neo-Ottomanism', multi-directional diplomacy, and 'soft power strategy'. Turkey was projected as a peace-promoting, normative regional leader, bearing the capacity to 'institute order' in its surrounding regions, which span from the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Caspian basin, the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and most notably the Middle East, to the Gulf and North Africa (Davutoğlu 2009).

In this widely voiced argument, "after decades of passivity and neglect" (Larrabee 2007, 103), TFP radically transformed from "a long-entrenched passive and isolationist stance to one of active engagement" (Aras and Görener 2010, 73). For Davutoğlu (2001), the status of being a bridge between the East and the West signified nothing but stagnation, which had to be replaced by a new activism based on assertive regionalism. Hence, Turkey had to reject the role and status of peripheral country imposed by Cold War security politics. Turkey's peculiar geography and its unique historical/cultural ties with neighbouring and regional countries impelled it to appropriate a new identity as a "central country" (Davutoğlu 2008, 77) or "pivotal state" (*Radikal* 2004) in its surrounding regions. In this era of thin populism, the Middle East constituted the locus of regionalist activism, with Turkey rediscovering the region and remoulding its relations with the regional states on which it had deliberately turned its back during the several decades of the Cold War. For the AKP leaders, Turkey had long neglected Middle Eastern states and societies due to either Western-centrism and the unidimensionality of its conventional foreign policy or the ideological orientations of the Kemalist state elites, who were alien to the authentic values of their own people.

As will be made clear below, this emphasis on authenticity has been expressed more loudly during the anti-Westernist populist era in TFP. For Davutoğlu and his followers, their foreign policy discourses and preferences were an integral part of the domestic power struggle, reflecting the vision of 'a new Turkey', at peace with the conservative Islamic values that were, at best, neglected and negated and, at worst, marginalised and degraded by the country's Kemalist tradition. In that tradition, Turkey was undoubtedly striving to be Western, to take its place in the front ranks of Western civilisation.



Secular Republicanism and Kemalist nationalism were the ultimate values of Turkish foreign and security policy and had to be defended within the highly securitised international politics (Kaliber 2005). Yet, in the populist foreign policy rhetoric of the successive AKP governments, the Islamic and Middle Eastern elements of Turkey's identity as well as its Ottoman legacy, which had all been marginalised in 'the old Turkey', provide 'the new Turkey' with a unique geographical depth. As such, this stress on Ottomanism – or neo-Ottomanism to some (see Murinson 2006) – came up against Kemalism and its foreign policy approach.

As another manifestation of this encounter, the distinctiveness of foreign policy activism under the AKP is articulated through some binary oppositions demarcating the 'old' from the 'new' periods of Turkish foreign policy. While the old or Kemalist paradigm is associated with the Cold War, Western-centrism, uni-dimensionality, securitisation of foreign policy, hard security issues and a narrow, elitist bureaucratic class, the new, liberal paradigm is identified with the exigencies of globalisation, multi-dimensional, multi-track diplomacy, desecuritisation, soft power and the diversification of domestic actors influencing foreign policy, all elements depicting Turkey's transformation from a "post-Cold War warrior" or "coercive regional power" (Öniş 2003) to a "benign regional power" (Kirişçi 2006, 11). Thus, the regionalist activism of the AKP governments in the era of thin populism has been praised by many scholars of Turkish politics as a paradigm shift from conventional policies. Yet, as observed by Özel and Özcan (2011), "contrary to what many argued, the AKP's foreign policy was characterized by few abrupt changes and a good deal of continuity with the approaches of previous Turkish governments" (127).

Turkey's aspiration to be an assertive regional power was defined by Turkish policy-makers in the early 2000s as complementary to or even an asset in Turkey's relations with the Western bloc and vice versa (Kut 1998, 54). For instance, Erdoğan reportedly stated, "If [Turkey is] more influential in the Middle East, it is an asset for [Turkey's] process in Europe, it is an asset in NATO". Hence, in the thinly populist era of TFP, Turkey's engagements with other regions were not seen as an alternative to its place within Western societies. Rather, Turkey's activism was defined as a corollary of the multiplication of its security interests and its "multiple roles and functions" (Aras and Görener 2010, 85) in regional and global politics. The message conveyed to the domestic public was that, in accordance with the AKP's new foreign policy vision, the West shifted from being the sole orientation of TFP to one of several points of reference.

A similar approach was observable in Turkey's approach to civilisational dialogue between the East and the West throughout the early 2000s. In 2005, Turkey became the leader of the Alliance of Civilisations Initiative in tandem with Spain. Turkey, as the only country that "has achieved what people said could never be achieved – a balance between Islam, democracy, secularism and modernity" (Matthews 2008), was seen as playing an invaluable role in developing the cultural and civilisational dialogue between the East and the West. In the thinly populist period, the Turkish foreign policy elite had a conception of the Eastern and Western civilisations as entirely different, monolithic but reconcilable entities that can coexist peacefully. Turkey contributed substantially to the inter-civilisational dialogue and co-existence as a society embracing elements of both, a notion that would radically change in the period of thick populism.

### ***The populist swing: Anti-Westernism in Turkish foreign policy***

As mentioned earlier, the beginning of the second or thick populist era of TFP can be traced back to the Gezi Park demonstrations in summer 2013,<sup>6</sup> when Erdoğan's rhetoric on the issue was characterised by deep distrust of Western states and institutions. However, the transition from thin to thick populism occurred gradually and consolidated within a process shaped by the intermingling effect of a number of domestic and international developments. In domestic politics, when the AKP won its third parliamentary elections in 2011, Erdoğan stated that the outcome meant that

In all friendly and brotherly nations from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku and Nicosia [... t]he hopes of the victims and the oppressed have won. [...] Beirut has won as much as Izmir. The West Bank, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem have won as much as Diyarbakır. The Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won, just as Turkey has won (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2011).

The message conveyed to the domestic and international audience was clear: the AKP's victory was to be seen as the beginning of a new era for all Muslim-majority societies embroiled in civil wars, conflicts and poverty due to Western conspiracies.

At the international level, for the Turkish ruling elites, "the wave of protests and uprisings that engulfed the Arab world" (Özel and Özcan 2011, 134) in the same year further consolidated Turkey's position as the new leader of the Islamic Ummah in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region.<sup>7</sup> The AKP leaders tended to "seize the events as a golden opportunity to expand Turkey's role and influence in the region" (Ayata 2015, 95) since they hoped that the Arab uprisings against corrupt and degenerated regimes would empower pro-Muslim Brotherhood parties perceived as ideologically akin to the AKP. Yet, the implications of the so-called Arab Spring turned out to be starkly different from what Turkish policymakers expected. The anticipation that Turkey would have close allies in the MENA region that would support its self-assigned regional leadership ambitions did not materialise.

With heightened sectarianism and pervasive geostrategic rivalry, the Turkish ability to steer a course with the dictum of democratic (even commercial) peace theory was categorically crowded out. Instead, Turkey had to confront the twin threats of refugees and terrorism, which undermined Turkish regional goals (Aras 2017, 10).

Anti-Westernism as the trademark of the thick populist era manifested itself mainly at the discursive level, but it became evident in the institutional structure and formulation of Turkish foreign policy as well. In institutional terms, the strengthening of the executive (either government or the president), making it predominant and in some cases the only institutional voice and actor in foreign policy, is a common characteristic of populist regimes, particularly in the non-West. In this sense, Turkey is no exception, and has replicated the cases of India and Venezuela (Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Hawkins 2016 respectively).

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<sup>6</sup>Large public protests sprang up spontaneously after plans to uproot the trees in Gezi Park in the centre of Istanbul became public, and later engulfed the whole country. These protests were reciprocated by police brutality and harsh discourses against the protesters on the part of AKP leaders. The EU and some of its member states stressed their concerns over the worsening level of democratic rights and freedoms, and criticised the Turkish government and police in particular for its disproportionate use of force against demonstrators.

<sup>7</sup>The authors are thankful to the referees for bringing this point to their attention.



In Turkey, foreign policy has long been perceived as a very specialised field of politics that can be entrusted only to those cognizant of its peculiar rules and techniques (Kaliber 2005). From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a modernising bureaucratic class or state elite considered themselves the “ultimate guardians” of the state and its modernisation (Heper 1985). After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, this bureaucratic class became the dominant power in the country. A substantial segment of that class was organised within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As such, a distinct foreign policy elite and ideology (*Hariciye*) emerged, known for its uncompromising loyalty to the secular and Westernising Kemalist principles and ideals.

Erdoğan frequently uses the French term *mon chers* to refer to politicians, bureaucrats and particularly diplomats who are Westernised, arrogant, elitist and patronising. This derogatory denomination has enabled him to humiliate and discredit the political and diplomatic cadres established in Turkey before the AKP came to power, and thereby to portray himself and the new cadres as authentic, humble and genuinely embedded in the Turkish culture and society. Erdoğan has argued on several occasions (*Milliyet* 2009; *Sabah* 2014) that “these old-fashioned elitists will never be able to understand what we as the servants of the Turkish people are aspiring to do. They are alien to their own society and they will remain so.”

Erdoğan and other policymakers consistently argue that the changing nature of Turkey’s relations with the West needs to be viewed as a clear manifestation of the difference between the old and the new Turkey. The quotation below from one of Erdoğan’s speeches delivered during his election campaign for the presidency on 6 March 2014 succinctly summarises this line of argument:

Turkey is now a country whose agenda is not determined, but who determines her own agenda, this is the difference we have. For years they have bowed down in front of the West, this is what they did. What did the West do? It gave orders, and they obeyed those orders. But now there is no such situation. We sit down, we talk, we take our decisions, but we make the decisions, this is the Turkey that there is now (Ayдын-Düzgit 2016, 51).

As is the case in Narendra Modi’s India, the role of the Foreign Ministry in decision-making processes has been substantially weakened for the sake of a more centralised and personalised foreign policy (Plagemann and Destradi 2018, 288) in the thick populism of TFP. Erdoğan has increasingly become the sole authority determining the strategic guidelines, content and orientation of TFP. Rather than the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erdoğan himself has been making key foreign policy declarations, conducting crucial bilateral and multilateral negotiations and representing Turkey in international organisations and high-level international conferences. He has also developed “personal relations with world leaders, engaged in almost daily telephone diplomacy, and intensified presidential foreign visits” (Aras 2017, 5). This has been the case particularly since Turkey became a presidential regime in 2017, legitimated by its proponents on the grounds of efficiency and “strong leadership” (Altun 2018). It seems that the demotion of the traditional foreign policy elite, who “have strongly held onto a Western-oriented, isolationist and passive foreign policy stand, while effectively excluding mass society from constructing alternative role conceptions” (Aras and Görener 2010, 78), is praised by many students of Turkish politics as well.

Another common feature of populist foreign policy is the tendency of populist leaders to express their distrust of international organisations and transnational institutions of global governance and portray them as a threat to national sovereignty and ‘the people’. International organisations (particularly financial ones, such as the International Monetary Fund) have been perceived as undermining their capacity to govern successfully as the legitimate representatives of the ‘real and virtuous people’. The existence of an international interest-rate lobby, notably international credit-rating agencies, aimed at toppling the legitimate government was the main discourse of the AKP leader’s ‘conspiratorial framing’ of the Gezi Park protests. Convinced that the Turkish economy had been under constant attack from Western-based financial institutions and lobbies, Erdoğan stated that the involvement of the West in instigating the Gezi Park protests was perspicuous:

[When we came to power] the interest rate in Turkey was 63 percent while the inflation rate was 30 percent. We fought hard and we dragged it down to 4.6 percent. This drove the West insane. And hence the Gezi events erupted. In the aftermath of these events, the interest and inflation rates climbed to double digits again (*Hürriyet* 2018).

Yet, the status of the West as Turkey’s threatening other is much more manifest in the AKP leaders’ discourses concerning national sovereignty and terrorism. According to a widely held conviction, the West is “sheltering terrorists because it [does] not want Turkey to become strong and powerful” (Zürcher 2018). Ibrahim Kalın, the Turkish Presidential Spokesman and Special Advisor to the president, stated that “European countries and the United States of America are safe havens for the PKK and FETO<sup>8</sup> where these can thrive and manoeuvre” (*Star* 2017). Similarly, numerous declarations have been made by different policy elites in which the West is explicitly accused of practising double standards *vis-à-vis* Turkey and its fight against terrorism (*Daily Sabah* 2019).

For the AKP leaders, the Western powers have increasingly been involved in Turkey’s internal affairs since the Gezi protests with the aim of weakening Turkey and its regional/global ambitions. Ibrahim Kalın, for instance, alleges that:

Their first attempt was [instigating] the Gezi events. Later came their attempt through the judicial coup of 17 and 25 December. Immediately afterward they resuscitated the terror attacks of the PKK. All these attempts failed to achieve their aims and eventually they incited the coup on 15 July [... b]ecause Turkey has been in a position to challenge the international system and to argue that this system is far from being just (*Star* 2017).

As observed in other populist regimes in the global South (Dodson and Dorraj 2008), opposition in Turkey has frequently been accused by the AKP leaders of collaborating with Western states and institutions. Opposition leaders are presented as members of a degenerate and corrupt elite working to the detriment of their own society and state. President Erdoğan has been particularly vociferous in equating the opposition with “evil forces”. During a rally in Ankara in the run-up to the local elections on 20 February 2019, he lumped the four main opposition parties (Republican People’s Party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP; Peoples’ Democratic Party, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP; Felicity Party, *Saadet Partisi*; and Good Party, *Iyi Parti*) together as a “quadruple alliance” which “takes

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<sup>8</sup>PKK stands for *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and FETO is the acronym for the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation, the name officially assigned by Turkey to the Gülen Movement, named after Fethullah Gülen.

directives from Qandil [the PKK]” and its “collaborators in the West”. The CHP constitutes the epicentre of his allegations of trying to “undermine national interests and the perpetuity of the country”. For example, in the recently revitalised crisis of gas drilling off Cyprus, he accused the CHP leadership of using the same rhetoric as the Greek Cypriots (*Sabah* 2019).

The following statement by Fahrettin Altun, the Presidency’s Communications Director, typifies this line of argument:

The media outlets in the West, which publicise the visual and printed materials fabricated by the PKK and FETO terror organisations, are waging a war against Turkey. [...] They do not want to see a Turkey which determines its own destiny and grows stronger day after day. They wish to see a Turkey which is dependent on the West and is ruled by Westernist elites who are alien to their own culture, which was the case 15 years ago. In order to bring Turkey back to this period, they have been trying to discredit President Erdoğan, who is the architect of Turkey’s transformation, and question his legitimacy. The non-national opposition in Turkey gives its support to these efforts and echoes what they project about Turkey (2017, 9).

As post-structuralist theory of international politics reveals, foreign policy functions as a “boundary-producing” (Campbell 1998, 62) and identity-marking practice. It draws a clear distinction between us and them, the national and the non-national, the legitimate and the illegitimate. The inimical others of the nation both inside and outside are merged into one another through the discourses of danger articulated via foreign policy (Campbell 1998). It is fair to suggest that populist regimes are even more inclined to domesticate foreign policy issues as issues of the national self and survival. For the populists of the new Turkey the opposition as the domestic collaborator of the hostile powers abroad, most notably the West or Europe, is not part of the self, but of the other. Opposition leaders are often depicted as serving the interests of foreign states, international institutions and transnational elites rather than those of their own nation and state.

It is a common practice of high-ranking AKP leaders to use ‘us’ versus ‘them’ conceptualisations. They often prefer to discursively construct the West as an essentially homogenous and monolithic entity representing everything “diametrically opposed to Turkey”. As suggested by Aydın-Düzgüt (2016, 51), “the use of binary oppositions of ‘Turkey’ and the ‘West’ not only leads to a clear demarcation of Turkey from the West, but also establishes a power relationship temporally first in favour of the West, then (post-AKP rule) in favour of Turkey itself”. Here lies a crucial difference between the thin and the thick populisms of TFP under the AKP governments. In the former, Turkey was portrayed as the only country that could reconcile Eastern and Western civilisations due to its firm political and cultural ties with both. It was accepted that the Turkish self encapsulates both Islamic and modern Western elements in its identity. In the latter, Turkey is solidly positioned within the Eastern civilisation fighting the West to protect its higher moral and civilisational values. Eastern and Western civilisations are defined in a Huntingtonian sense as two necessarily divergent and irreconcilable poles competing for global power and domination. Hence, in the period of thick populism, the Turkish self is defined negatively against the Western other.

As another manifestation of anti-Westernism, the West is constructed as a subject that is feeding and fed by Islamophobia, and that orchestrates “serious plots and games” against Islamic countries. As “successors of Lawrence of Arabia” (Middle East Media Research Institute 2015) or “reincarnated crusaders” (*Sabah* 2017), it is the Western powers that have caused Muslims to kill one another, particularly in the Middle East

and Africa. In his speech at the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul in 2015, Erdoğan stated that “they were having Muslims kill other Muslims” (*Yeni Akit* 2015). Whereas in the thinly populist era of TFP Turkey’s EU membership was presented “as an answer to the arguments of the clash of civilisations” (Özcan 2008), in the period of thick populism it turns out to be a litmus test for the EU and its Islamophobic tendencies.

We are continuing the EU accession process. It is not important to us whether they accept us or not. In fact, we are testing Europe. Are they able to digest the membership of a state with a Muslim population? Are they against Islamophobia or not? If they are, they must accept Turkey. Otherwise, the EU will prove the claims that it is a Christian club (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2015).

## Conclusion

This article has explored different populist turns of the recent Turkish foreign policy under the successive AKP governments. It has made a clear distinction between the thin and the thick populisms of TFP and has argued that this distinction has mainly revolved around the status of the West. The first decade of the AKP rule, where foreign policy was thinly populist, was characterised by steady de-Europeanisation, increasing engagement with regional issues, states and institutions, and decentring of Turkey’s Western orientation in favour of the country as a multi-regional actor in international politics. While the foreign policy approach of that era was based on critical questioning of the uni-dimensional, Western orientation of the foreign policy tradition in Turkey, for regionalist populism the West was still one of the main sources of foreign and security policy. Turkey’s integration with the EU was still discursively framed as one of the strategic goals of TFP. The West was part of the Turkish self, not its other. The foreign policy establishment of the time often defended the idea that Turkey distanced itself not from the West but from Western-centrism, manifested as the weakening of Europe as a normative political context (de-Europeanisation).

Yet, starting with the Gezi protests of 2013 and particularly following the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, populist dynamics have increasingly been influential in shaping the ways in which foreign policy issues are discursively framed and publicised by policy-makers in Turkey. The era of thick populism in TFP has been characterised mainly by anti-Westernist discourses in which the West is resituated as the other of the Turkish political identity. In a similar vein, the civilisational discourse adopted by AKP officials differs radically from the discourse of the thin populist era of TFP. In the latter, Turkey was projected as having the ability to fuse the elements of both Eastern and Western civilisations and, thus, as having the means to consolidate intercivilisational dialogue and the will to co-exist. At present, however, Turkey is solidly positioned as a member of the morally superior Eastern civilisation, imagined as having a necessarily confrontational relationship with the Western other for global power and domination.

The discourse securitising the West as an inimical other threatening the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity has intensified exponentially since the failed coup attempt orchestrated by the AKP government’s close ally-turned-enemy, the Gülen Movement. For long-time observer of Turkish politics Erik Jan Zürcher (2018), “the perceived lack of solidarity on the part of the West after the failed coup of July 2016,

and the criticism of the crackdown on dissidents that followed” can be cited among the factors making “Erdoğan’s anti-Western discourse more vehement”.

A discursive move frequently observable throughout anti-Westernist populism is to discredit the domestic political opposition through its direct association with Turkey’s external enemies, thereby serving the interests of the transnational elite rather than those of ordinary citizens and the national will, and delegitimizing critiques levelled against the incumbent government. This is a well-known strategy on the part of rightwing populist governments that has often resulted in the crippling of democratic politics and institutions in those countries. One can only hope that Turkey will give up this path in the short or long term.

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