



**POPULISM IN TURKISH RIGHT-WING POLITICS: AN
ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS
AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES**

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have conducted my work in accordance with academic rules and ethical behaviour at every stage from the planning of the thesis to its defence. I confirm that I have cited all ideas, information and findings that are not specific to my study, as required by the code of ethical behaviour, and that all statements not cited are my own.

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ABSTRACT

POPULISM IN TURKISH RIGHT-WING POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES

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This thesis explores the emergence and the subsequent rise of right-wing populism as a new challenger against the established global liberal order, with particular focus on contemporary Turkish politics. The study examines several case studies across the world in order to form a theoretical background, while also reviewing both late Ottoman era and the following republican period to establish historical background specifically for the Turkish case. After careful examination and analyzation of both Turkish political history and contemporary right-wing parties in Turkey's political sphere, this study concluded that the rise and eventual entrenchment of populism in the Turkish politics is not an '*anomaly*', but rather an '*ordinary*' development in line with the global trend. Thus, this study aimed to point out and categorize different manifestations of populism in Turkish right-wing politics in terms of similarities and differences between their rhetoric, ideologies, statements, and characteristics to further our understanding of both populism and the fragmented Turkish right. To achieve this premise, this study explored the Justice and Development Party-JDP, the New Welfare

Party-NWP, and the Victory Party-VP and concluded that, although these parties share similar outlooks on several political issues, their differences necessitate distinct a categorization. In summary, this thesis concluded that: there is a “*charismatic*” manifestation of populism under the JDP, similar to Donald J. Trump’s populism; a unique “*Islamist*” manifestation of populism under the NWP; and “*confrontational-nationalist*” manifestation of populism under the VP akin to European examples such as Hungary, in contemporary Turkish right-wing politics.

Keywords: Right-Wing Populism, Globalism, Neoliberalism, Contemporary Turkish Politics, Turkey.



ÖZET

TÜRK SAĞ SİYASETİNDE POPÜLİZM: GÜNCEL TEZAHÜRLER VE SİYASİ STRATEJİLERİN BİR ANALİZİ

Çalapkulu, Cem

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Bu tez, küresel liberal düzene karşı yeni bir meydan okuyucu olarak ortaya çıkan ve ardından yükselişe geçen sağ popülizmi, özellikle güncel Türk siyasetine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Çalışma, teorik bir altyapı oluşturmak amacıyla dünyanın çeşitli yerlerindeki vaka incelemelerini ele almakta, ayrıca geç Osmanlı dönemi ve onu takip eden Cumhuriyet dönemi üzerine de odaklanarak Türk örneğine özgü bir tarihsel zemin sunmaktadır. Türk siyasi tarihi ve Türkiye'nin siyasi arenasındaki güncel sağ partiler dikkatle incelendikten ve analiz edildikten sonra, bu çalışmada popülizmin Türk siyasetinde yükselmesinin ve yerleşmesinin bir '*anomali*' değil, aksine küresel trende uygun olarak '*olağan*' bir gelişme olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır. Bu doğrultuda, çalışmada Türk sağ siyasetinde popülizmin farklı tezahürleri retorik, ideolojik, söylemsel ve karakteristikler açısından benzerlikler ve farklılıklar temelinde kategorize edilerek hem popülizmi hem de parçalı Türk sağını anlamaya katkıda bulunmak amaçlanmıştır. Bu hedef doğrultusunda, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP, Yeniden Refah Partisi-YRP ve Zafer Partisi-ZP incelenmiş, ve bu partilerin birçok

siyasi meselede benzer bakış açılarını paylaşımlarına rağmen, farklılıklarının ayrı bir kategorilendirmeyi zorunlu kıldığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, bu tezde, güncel Türk sağ siyasetinde: AKP'nin Donald J. Trump'ın popülizmine benzer bir “*karizmatik*” popülizm tezahürüne; YRP'nin benzersiz bir “*İslamcı*” popülizm tezahürüne; ve ZP'nin, Macaristan gibi Avrupa örneklerine benzeyen “*çatışmacı-milliyetçi*” bir popülizm tezahürüne sahip olduğu ortaya konulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sağ Popülizm, Küreselleşme, Neoliberalizm, Güncel Türk Siyaseti, Türkiye.



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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Populism and populist rhetoric have become dominant political tools worldwide, employed by both left-wing and right-wing politicians in the 21st century. This shift signals a new era in global politics and raises questions about which ideological camp will prevail in the coming decades. Understanding populism and its various manifestations is therefore essential, particularly for analyzing the trajectory of contemporary Turkish politics. Historically, Turkey's political sphere has been overwhelmingly dominated by right-wing ideologies, with populist discourse becoming deeply entrenched and forming a symbiotic relationship with nationalist, Islamist, and anti-elite rhetoric. According to Cas Mudde (2004, 2017), populism is a "thin-centered ideology" that relies on and complements broader ideological frameworks, dividing society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." This "us versus them" dynamic is central to understanding the global rise of populism in the 21st century and its role in the stagnation—or even decline—of liberal democracy.

The focus on right-wing populism in this thesis is justified by its long-standing and pervasive influence on Turkish politics, shaping both historical and contemporary political dynamics. Unlike left-wing populism, which has remained relatively marginal, right-wing populism has consistently dominated Turkish political discourse, mobilizing large segments of society through nationalist and religious narratives. Examining this phenomenon within both global and domestic contexts is crucial for understanding how right-wing populist movements and parties have influenced Turkey's governance, contributed to political polarization, and played a significant role in democratic backsliding. Given its deep historical roots, as well as its enduring and longstanding impact, right-wing populism provides a broad and critical framework for analyzing Turkey's contemporary political landscape, its right-wing oriented political movements and parties. Because of this reason, careful examination and analysis of right-wing populism in the context of Turkey is imperative, for both political scientists as well as the academic literature in order to obtain sufficient understanding of this phenomena.

1.1. Research Question & Contribution

This thesis seeks to address the following research question: **What are the similarities and differences between different manifestations of populism in the Turkish right?**

This question is crucial for developing a clear and precise understanding of contemporary Turkish politics. Examining both the differences and similarities between Turkish right-wing populist parties—such as the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, JDP), the New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah Partisi, NWP), and the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi, VP)—can provide key insights into how populism manifests in distinct yet similar forms and operates within Turkey's political landscape.

Although numerous academic works have examined nationalism, religion, and political orientation in the context of the rise of the right-wing in Turkey, these studies have primarily focused on socio-economic and ideological factors rather than the role of populism as a political strategy. Furthermore, much of the existing literature on right-wing populism in Turkey has centered on the JDP, its policies, and its ideological evolution. To address this gap, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by offering a new categorization of right-wing populist approaches among distinct political organizations, parties, and movements in contemporary Turkish politics, based on their ideological and rhetorical differences.

1.2. Introduction to Theoretical Framework

A critical aspect of understanding populism's rise is examining how the shortcomings of liberal democracies have facilitated its emergence. According to Mudde, these shortcomings include, but are not limited to, perceived social injustices caused by globalization and multiculturalism, economic hardships experienced by the common folk due to the neo-liberal economic policies of the elites, and the widening socio-economic gap between the rulers and the ruled. Additionally, the rigid institutional structures of liberal democracies, their slow decision-making processes, and their perceived alignment with supranational organizations—often at the expense

of national sovereignty—have further fueled populist sentiments. These factors have contributed to the rapid spread of populism, not only within liberal democracies but also in illiberal and authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, advancements in communication and media technologies have created an environment in which populist rhetoric can thrive, amplifying existing grievances and societal discontent, thereby pushing political discourse toward more extreme and radicalized positions. As Mudde (2004, 2017) argues, populism, due to its thin-centered nature, does not constitute a fully developed ideological framework on its own. Instead, populist movements, political parties, and leaders strategically align populist discourse with broader ideological narratives to achieve political success. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for analyzing the manifestations of populism in Turkey.

1.3. Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the rise of right-wing populism in Turkey, with a notable focus on the political discourse of leaders and prominent political actors from various right-wing parties, particularly in the fourth chapter of the thesis. The primary sources of data include existing academic literature on right-wing populism, political party programs, election manifestos, and speeches by party representatives. These sources are examined and analyzed to understand the key ideologies, rhetoric, and populist strategies employed by these parties.

To assess political discourse, this study adopts discourse analysis, which explores how language constructs meaning, identities, and power dynamics within society. Discourse analysis is particularly useful in political science for examining influential concepts such as nationalism, populism, and ideology, as it highlights how political actors frame issues, mobilize social and political support, and construct inclusive or exclusive narratives to serve their political agendas (Laclau, 2005). Unlike traditional content analysis, which focuses on counting words or themes, discourse analysis investigates the underlying assumptions, ideological structures and social meanings embedded in communication (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2006).

There are multiple approaches to discourse analysis. Laclau's discourse theory examines how political identities are constructed through signifiers such as "the people" and "the elite" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Meanwhile, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on how discourse reflects, reinforces, or challenges existing power structures in society (Fairclough, 1992). In the context of this thesis, discourse analysis provides a deeper understanding of how language is strategically used to shape political conflicts, construct narratives, influence public opinion, and establish ideological dominance within the framework of right-wing populism.

To complement discourse analysis, this thesis also employs comparative analysis, which facilitates the identification of similarities and differences in the populist manifestations of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), the New Welfare Party (NWP), and the Victory Party (VP). Comparative analysis is widely used in political science to examine different countries, institutions, policies, or historical events to identify patterns and assess variations in political phenomena (Sartori, 1994). By contrasting multiple cases, researchers aim to understand how various factors influence political outcomes and to draw broader conclusions applicable across different contexts (Lijphart, 1971).

In this study, comparative analysis is applied to party rhetoric, programs, manifestos, and speeches to determine how populism manifests across different right-wing political entities. This approach is particularly valuable in cross-national comparisons and case studies, as it enables scholars to test theories, establish causal relationships, and assess the applicability of concepts across diverse political environments (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). By integrating comparative analysis with discourse analysis, this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive examination of right-wing populism in Turkey, while also situating it within global populist trends and historical developments.

Accordingly, this thesis is structured into five chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive analysis of right-wing populism in Turkey:

Chapter 1 introduces populism as a global political phenomenon, emphasizing Cas Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology. It justifies the focus on

right-wing populism in Turkish politics, outlines the research question, and provides an overview of the methodology and thesis structure.

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework by defining populism, particularly through Cas Mudde's perspective, and analyzing its various manifestations in contemporary politics, focusing on Europe and the United States. It examines Donald Trump's populist approach, highlighting his use of the "us vs. them" rhetoric, and compares it with European right-wing populists such as Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán, demonstrating how national contexts shape different populist narratives. This chapter serves to provide a theoretical and comparative basis for analyzing Turkish populism.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of right-wing politics in Turkey from the late Ottoman period to the present. It explores how Islamic conservatism and Turkish nationalism emerged in response to modernization and Westernization, shaping the ideological foundations of Turkish right-wing politics. It also examines anti-establishment sentiments, particularly among rural and conservative communities, and compares Turkey's political development with global populist movements.

Chapter 4 analyzes the JDP, NWP, and VP through their party programs, election manifestos, rhetoric, and political discourse. It categorizes Turkish right-wing populism into three distinct forms: JDP's "charismatic" populism, centered around Erdoğan's leadership; NWP's "Islamist" populism, rooted in the *Milli Görüş* ideology; and VP's "Confrontational-Nationalist" populism, focused on anti-immigration and sovereignty narratives. While these parties share common populist traits, their ideological differences create a fragmented right-wing landscape in Turkey.

Chapter 5 summarizes key theoretical and historical findings, reflects on the broader implications of populism in Turkish politics, and discusses the future trajectory of right-wing populism in Turkey. It also situates the findings within the broader discussion of populism's role in shaping modern democracies.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As previously mentioned, this thesis employs Cas Mudde's definition of populism to analyze its symbiotic relationship with right-wing politics. This chapter primarily aims to define populism theoretically and explain the root of its symbiotic relationship with right-wing politics, for both global and Turkish contexts respectively. Additionally, this chapter will also focus on populism's key characteristics such as anti-elitism, anti-establishment sentiments, cultural and traditional leniencies, and its operational methods, while also reviewing global right-wing populist case examples from both 'old' and 'new' world, to establish a theoretical foundation for the following sections for a better transition and focus for contemporary Turkish politics.

2.1. Defining Populism: A Theoretical Approach

According to Mudde (2004, 2017), populism is a thin-centered ideology, not an ideology in itself but a political tool that attaches to and strengthens a broader ideology through rhetoric and discourse. This creates a strong dependency between populist rhetoric and the ideology it adopts. While both left and right-wing movements have historically used—and still continues to use—populism, the recent global rise of the right can be attributed to its more effective incorporation of populist strategies and rhetoric. In the Turkish context for example, nationalism and especially Islam have served as primary ideological foundations for populism (Aytürk, 2014), shaping its contemporary manifestations. Additionally, Mudde also argues that populism does not provide a defined worldview by itself, but instead revolves around a fundamental opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elites”. In this context, Mudde defines “the pure people” as a homogenous group which represents the entire "nation", and “the corrupt elites” are portrayed as self-serving individuals that are only concerned about their own gains and agendas, who are completely detached from the common people that create many perceived societal injustices within societies. By doing so, populism manages to capitalize on anti-establishment and anti-elitist sentiments by framing varying political struggles as "battles" between these two groups; reinforcing distrust toward mainstream institutions, establishments, and established political actors and leaders. Additionally, because populism lacks a

comprehensive ideology like liberalism, socialism, or conservatism, it merges itself with much more established ideologies, to adapt different political contexts. This flexibility of populism as a significant political tool allows political actors to shape their populist narratives mainly around issues such as; immigration, economic inequality, or unemployment. Particularly in Turkey; Islam, nationalism, conservative traditionalism, and charismatic leadership are all intertwined with populism, thus demonstrating its adaptability in contemporary politics.

As Cas Mudde (2004, 2017) makes it clear that populism is not dependent on any particular ideology to emerge, however, depending on different political contexts it can acquire a right-wing or left-wing character. As stated above, this thesis solely focuses on right-wing populism, which generally emphasizes nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiments and dissatisfactions, traditionalism, and conservatism. Accordingly, many far-right parties in Europe and Middle-East fall into this category while leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fall into this category according to this approach. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) also states that populism has a tense and critical relationship with liberal democracy as a system. Since by claiming to represent the general will of the people, many populist leaders can and do weaken institutional checks and balances within their respective countries and societies. This, in turn, makes populism a very dangerous political tool that can undermine the entire democratic process according to them. Mudde (2004, 2017) furthermore argued that populism is a phenomenon which is becoming increasingly dominant and influential in contemporary politics due to globalization, economic crises, resentments to the establishment by the public, and the seemingly unstoppable growth of distrust towards traditional political parties.

Although populism is capable of both existing and functioning in both left-wing and right-wing politics as a political tool, left-wing populism in particular, in contemporary politics is frequently characterized by its firm opposition to neoliberal policies, corporate power, and perceived economic inequalities (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Left-wing populism, which primarily focuses on these kinds of issues, attempts to win over frustrated segments of society and their votes and political support. By employing these concerns as the main pillars of its political discourse, it also staunchly promotes social justice, wealth redistribution, and expanded welfare programs, all of which left-

wing populism considers are essential to eliminating perceived social, political, and economic inequities that it identifies (Ward and Guglielmo, 2024). On the other hand, left-wing populism aims to organize the blue-collar working class and marginalized communities against perceived elites, especially those in political and economic power, while right-wing populism prioritizes nationalism and cultural identity. By presenting themselves as the "true" representatives of "the people" against a corrupt elite that, in their opinion, puts individual wealth above general welfare and prosperity (Ward and Guglielmo, 2024), these left-wing movements typically oppose the established power structures in the particular political environment. To address the aforementioned perceived systemic and social inequalities, left-wing populist discourse frequently advocates for progressive social policies, more governmental control of the economy—or state intervention if deemed necessary—and the extension of public services. Left-wing populist movements, however, are also criticized for their aggressive stance against political institutions and their demands for drastic economic and social reforms, which have the potential to strain democratic processes and destabilize established political structures (de la Torre, 2016).

While the chosen approach and definition of Mudde is applicable for examining both left and right-wing politics, due to current global politic climate and trends; right-wing populism, which heavily emphasizes nationalism, conservatism, religious leniencies, and anti-immigration (Mudde; 2004, 2017) is chosen to be focused on in this chapter and onwards, due to left-wing politics which predominantly focuses on economic justice, anti-capitalist tendencies, and human rights being in constant decline for the past couple of decades. While contemporary politics can be examined from both sides of the political spectrum according to Mudde's populism definition, including left-wing populism while analyzing a right-wing dominated global and domestic politics would be both unnecessary and inefficient. Thus, especially for the sake of better understanding of contemporary Turkish politics and context, I have chosen to solely focus on right-wing populism and disregarded the left-wing oriented politics.

While being a relatively new term, the origins of populism, and especially right-wing populism, date back much further, but it really started to gain momentum in the West in the latter half of the 20th century. In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, growing discontent with established political elites and the effects of globalization, along with

additional political, economic, and social developments contributed to the rise of the contemporary wave of right-wing populism (Laclau, 2005, p. 37). It is crucial to keep in mind that the emergence of right-wing populism in the West is a complex process that is still ongoing and involves several different factors rather than one major event that enabled it to gain popularity (Müller, 2016, pp. 102-104). While right-wing populism began to gain momentum in Western societies, specifically the United States and EU countries, due to similar yet varying degrees of democratic, societal, and economic crises, many post-Soviet Eastern European and Middle Eastern countries also experienced a comparable rise in the popularity and influence of right-wing oriented populism during the same period. Right-wing populism emerging globally as a response to common factors in these regions share some fundamental drivers of populist sentiment (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005), but the ways in which populism manifests reflect distinct historical, political, and cultural contexts. While both Laclau's and Müller's definitions of populism differ from Mudde's "thin-centered ideology" description, their stances do not outright reject its premise. For instance, Laclau (2005) argues that "the people" are not a pre-defined group but rather comes to existence via language and discourse. He does not recognize populism as an ideology, unlike Mudde, and defines it as a process which constructs political identities for members of society to unite as "the people" via discourse and symbols. Müller (2016) on the other hand, argues that populism is not only anti-elitist, but it also is anti-pluralist in its core; meaning that populism acts as a weapon for political leaders to create a political environment in which only "the people that share similar worldviews" are "the real" people, and not "others, in opposition". Since this thesis is concerned with the symbiotic relationship between right-wing and populism, Mudde's (2004, 2017) definition fits best in order to classify different manifestations in contemporary politics, rather than Laclau's "discursive process" approach since it is mostly concerned with political identities, or Müller's approach which predominantly focuses on democratic-theory and dangers of populism to liberal democracy.

2.2. Key Characteristics of Right-Wing Populism

In all cases, the rise of right-wing populism can be traced back to dissatisfaction with political elites, economic dislocation, economic dissatisfaction and cultural changes of the people while the specifics vary dependent on the culture and the society. While the

ways of life in different Western societies were almost fully compatible with each other, the regional geopolitics and international situations of different states have created subtle divergences (Pappas, 2019). To further explain this subtle division, many Western democracies, particularly the EU members, began showing different signs of societal and economic stagnation in the years following the Cold War (Mudde, 2004). These included a broad sense of political weakness, caused by the slow democratic decision-making process (Dalton, 2008); increasing dissatisfaction with the ruling political elite and the establishment itself, and economic and societal inequalities. This perception of growing inequality, the breakdown of social security mechanisms, and a surge in immigration were all effects of globalization, which in turn encouraged populist groups and demagogues to accuse liberal democracies for their failure to address these issues (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005).

Although it was still consistent with the trends in Western and Eastern European nations, right-wing populism in the Middle-East took on a slightly different form (Salamey, 2017). In the Middle-East, right-wing populism came into contact with attempts that challenged Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism. Populist leaders took advantage of nationalist and religious feelings present among the common folk, nations like Egypt and Turkey for example (Tuğal, 2016), portraying themselves as protectors of both religion itself and national identities against outside forces, primarily Western-led concepts like liberalism and secularism (Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018). These leaders often framed their rhetoric as a minor component of a larger mission to stabilize their nations rather than as something that was intrinsically harmful to democracy or human rights. In order to resolve internal conflicts and instability, they usually claimed that their right-wing populist rhetoric and the acts that followed were legitimate in their attempts to regain control from outside influences that has been provided above (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). These populists believed that in order to achieve and maintain political and cultural integrity, their actions were not only important, but completely necessary and justified (Pappas, 2019; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

As right-wing populism's popularity trajectory is suggesting that it will continue to grow even stronger, and that there is no consensus on its definition that could be applied and understood for each and every case, the need for contextuality arises for

proper examination. For this reason, reviewing and examining global right-wing populist examples is critical for establishing a dependable theoretical framework. In the context of the US' (United States) politics for example, the term right-wing populism could be used to describe and analyze the recent success of the President-elect Donald J. Trump from the Republican Party; while in the context of European politics the term right-wing populism could also be used to understand how Hungary's Federation of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz), and Civic Platform (PO) and Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) rose to power and retained control over their respective countries. Even though the political parties mentioned above are vastly different than each other in many aspects, their rise of popularity, support base and legitimacy in the eyes of the public sphere could be attributed to their right-wing populist rhetoric and political approaches. In order to understand how this term is applicable to such different cases, a broad definition of right-wing populism must be presented.

Since we established that the right-wing populism, and populism itself in general, is a political movement trend that seemingly does not align itself with any specific ideology but rather with the perceived common grievances and the resentments of the people towards the establishment (Müller, 2016, p.102), it often combines nationalistic and conservative ideas and rhetoric depending on the given culture, aiming to mobilize the *common folk* or *the people*, to gather political power and support against the *corrupt political elites* that are undermining and exploiting said people. Right-wing populists, therefore, claim that corrupted establishment is out of touch with ordinary citizens and advocate themselves to the people as the *brave saviors* either subtly or outright openly. To strengthen such claims, right-wing populism often focuses on issues such as the preservation of cultural identity in each society, protection of national sovereignty and traditions against immigration and the subsequent crises it presents and multiculturalism as a whole. Right-wing populism and populist demagogues typically appeal to feelings of the people in terms of economic uncertainty, cultural insecurity or a sense of moral decline within given societies, while creating a *us versus them* dynamic between the *good* and *pure* people, and a *self-serving* and *corrupt elite* (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6) of the establishment. Thus, it is evident that globalization itself stimulates populism to a great extent especially after the early 1990s and onwards. Considering that it is the beginning of the Post-Soviet Union era,

the emergence of right-wing populism as a strong candidate to solve the so-called *crisis of democracy*, instead of socialist and left-leaning ideologies and theoretical frameworks is, therefore, not something unexpected.

2.3. The Global Rise of Right-Wing Populism

Considering all of the above, it is not surprising that the emergence and subsequent global rise of right-wing populism is often attributed to liberal democracies' shortcomings, contesting their core values and customs. One of its main criticisms is aimed at political institutions and elites, which populists usually claim have lost touch with the interests and ideals of common people, for the sake of their own benefits. They define this anti-elitism as a just reaction to what they see to be a democratic deficit in liberal regimes, where an unaccountable, corrupt elite controls decision-making instead of ordinary people. While the promotion of human rights, international cooperation and economic openness are some of the most important aspects and policies of many liberal democracies, these policies are frequently perceived as dangerous for the integrity and solidarity of the people by the right-wing populists (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 139). They often claim that these kinds of policies are the main perpetrators for uncontrolled immigration waves that in turn create economic and social insecurity for ordinary people.

Another common target is liberal democracies' acceptance of globalization and multiculturalism. These policies, according to right-wing populists, exist in order to damage social unity and solidarity, undermine national identity (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018), and put the interests of minorities ahead of those of the majority. In the same manner, globalization is viewed as a process that increases social inequality and economic insecurity by rewarding multinational firms and corporations and cosmopolitan elites at the expense of local businesses and workers. In addition to those mentioned above, cultural factors are just as significant, if not more so. Many right-wing populist movements argue that progressive social principles such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights (Inglehart and Norris, 2019, pp. 19-21), and secularism, all of which are supported by liberal democracies and are immensely damaging towards traditional family structures, religious convictions, and cultural norms (Inglehart and

Norris, 2019, pp. 226-230). Because of this cultural backlash, populists are seen as defending tradition against what they claim are liberalism's moral and social flaws.

The decline of national sovereignty within the context of liberal internationalism is another issue of discussion for right-wing populists. They frequently use undermining rhetorics against supranational organizations, such as the EU in the case for Europe for example (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 42-45), for enforcing laws and policies that disregard or override regional needs and preferences. As is evident, a common subject in populist discourse is the conflict between global governance and national self-determination. The pluralism that defines liberal democracies is frequently challenged by right-wing populists and their rhetoric. As self-proclaimed defenders of the *common people*, they argue that the interests of the majority are superior to those of established institutions and minorities within their societies. By doing this, they advocate for the destruction, or at the very least for the weakening of important liberal institutions and establishment mechanisms that they see as limiting the will of the people. This often involves delegitimizing attacks and rhetoric on social media, independent media, ruling elite and the judiciary system as a whole (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 75-80). They aim to create widespread doubt among the public towards the constitutional rights and protections given to the minorities in their society.

On the other hand, economic discontent further fuels the rise of right-wing populism in many cases. As mentioned above, many populists present themselves as champions and defenders of those left behind by the neoliberal policies of liberal democracies, by arguing for protectionist or nationalist alternatives to solve economic problems (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 45). This economic critique of right-wing populism, combined with cultural and political dissatisfaction, helps explain their growing popularity (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018, p. 33).

Right-wing populists frequently use, perhaps paradoxically, the mechanisms of liberal democracy such as elections, media access, and free speech to gain power. Once in office, however, they often implement policies that erode democratic norms, challenging and undermining pluralism, inclusivity, and institutional protections that guarantee the survival of liberal democratic governance (Mudde, 2004, p. 78). As pointed out by Mudde, Eatwell and Goodwin many times, free elections are often seen

as the cornerstone of any functioning democratic system, providing their citizens with the opportunity to choose their representatives and rulers while also giving power to the people to directly influence the direction of governance of the state. For populist leaders, however, elections serve not only as a way to gain power but also as a key tool for legitimizing their political movement. By tapping into widespread frustration with established political structures (Mudde, 2004, pp. 78-79), before or even after they gain political power, populists often frame their narrative in terms of a battle against the corrupt elite by those who feel marginalized, undervalued or ignored (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018) by traditional political institutions. This rhetoric, which promises to restore the voice and power of the people, resonates deeply with voters who feel disconnected from the political process. Through this portrayal, populist leaders gain substantial popular and political support, bolstering their legitimacy by framing themselves as the only representatives of the people's true will.

Once in power, the rhetoric of populist leaders often shifts dramatically. Instead of defending democratic institutions, they used to gain such power to begin with, as essential safeguards and begin to portray these institutions as obstacles to the people's will. The judiciary, for example, is often targeted and framed as a rotten instrument in the hands of the corrupt elite, rather than an independent mechanism that ensures fairness and protection of individual rights (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 52) of the people. Similarly, opposition media is either oppressed, marginalized or even eliminated through legal or political means, with populist leaders justifying these actions as necessary for the nation's ensured survival and progress (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 67). In addition, civil society groups, especially those that advocate for human rights or the ones that hold the government accountable for such democratic erosions, are also under constant attack. These kinds of civil society groups and organizations are often labeled as enemies of the people and the nation as a whole (Mudde, 2004, p.103) by the right-wing populist rhetoric. Many right-wing populists argue that such harsh steps are essential to restore national sovereignty and awaken the people, claiming that the weakening of democratic protections is not an authoritarian move but a necessary correction to a system corrupted by a self-serving elite. In their view, these actions are portrayed to return power to the people, removing the obstacles that have kept the majority's will from being fully realized (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 75). With populist politicians increasingly using their election mandate as a

justification to attack and undermine democratic institutions, in many cases it eventually results in the consolidation of power in the hands of a single charismatic demagogue or a small group of right-wing-oriented cadres (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 42-45). Because of this, the very institutions that exist to protect democracy and pluralism may be subverted or destroyed under the pretext of "reclaiming and restoring the *power* with the *people*" (Rooduijn, 2018, p. 89). In contemporary politics, this shift can occur either subtly or suddenly, depending on the given society and culture. It can be argued that the pace and intensity of this shift from a democratic establishment toward an illiberal or even autocratic establishment depends on the aforementioned accelerating factors (Pappas, 2019, p. 124).

2.3.1. Populism in the Context of the United States

Primarily, understanding the rise of right-wing populism especially in the US is critical for us to examine and understand the rise of right-wing populism in global political structure and landscape, since the US has been regarded as the “*Arsenal of Democracy*” and a strong advocate for liberal ideas. By understanding the primary reason(s) and the root(s) of right-wing populism’s rise in the US, we can apply the theoretical outcomes we reach in this chapter for better understanding the Turkish context. As such, it can be said that the rise of right-wing populism in the US can be attributed to a mixture of political, cultural, and economic factors that have influenced the political environment of the nation in the past few decades. While the movement began to gain popularity in the last few decades of the 20th century, it peaked in the 21st century, especially after Donald J. Trump was elected president in 2016. Several significant developments such as the US economy, politics, cultural contentions and the rapidly increasing influence capacity of the media sector can be used as a viewpoint which we can analyze this process.

Although the US was, and still is, one of the greatest winners of globalization; since globalization inherently promotes and requires international cooperation, outsourcing of labor and offshoring of manufacturing to less developed countries; it also had several negative effects upon the US economy (Reich, 2015, p. 77). These developments brought by globalization provided the US with significant income growth in some sectors such as high technology, textile industry and financial services,

while also negatively impacting certain regions and demographics within US borders. Several states that have been regarded as the industrial heartland of the entire US that fed the economy steadily, so-called “Rust Belt” for example, faced dangerous levels of deindustrialization and eventual unemployment crises (Reich, 2015, pp. 88-89). Especially after the dawn of the new millennium, as a direct consequence of the globalization process deindustrialization resulted in the closure of countless number of factories and workshops that were no longer needed, culminating in loss of millions of manufacturing jobs for the American working class (Reich, 2015, p. 93). Considering the fact millions of Americans now left without any financial security and diminished sense of identity and purpose; understandably a resentment towards the establishment and the ruling elite began to fester among the American public (Reich, 2015, p. 132).

As mentioned above, this economic downfall and intense unemployment was not only financially straining, but also a psychological deterrent for the blue-collar workers against the liberal democratic establishment. For many within the blue-collar workforce that was now unemployed, the loss of the manufacturing jobs also meant the loss of the cornerstone economic stability sector of the whole US. As the working class began to distrust the political elites, since it was seen as a clear sign of betrayal by those in charge, right-wing populist rhetoric seized on this newly emerging discontent, framing a great number of global trade agreements and policies—such as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which was being promoted by the US elites in order to continue the growth of the national economy and strengthen ties between US, Canada and Mexico—as self-serving in the hands of corrupt US elites; working for the betterment of corporates and international political power rather than the well-being and security of American workers (Reich, 2015, pp. 132-133).

Donald J. Trump’s entire 2016 presidential campaign is a great summary to further our understanding of economic populism. Trump, for example, by focusing his rhetoric on disaffected voters who held grievances to the system due to their economic downfalls especially in industrial heartland states, managed to effectively tap into these frustrations. While being distinctly and overtly critical about globalism, he also promised to create new manufacturing jobs by reigniting the US industrial fervor and taking drastic measures to move US away from outsourcing and offshoring jobs to less

developed countries. In addition, he also promised to either renegotiate or completely withdraw from many trade agreements, adopting an “America First” economic policy that prioritized American people (Conley, 2020, p. 210), mainly the blue-collar workforce. His famous—or infamous depending on one’s stance on politics— “Make America Great Again” slogan resonated deeply with many Americans that already believed their economic struggles were only a symptom of a much broader national and cultural stagnation and decline. Additionally, cultural factors have been indisputably important in shaping the rise of right-wing populism in the US, particularly in terms of demographic shifts and general anxieties these have generated among certain portions of the American public.

Over the past two decades, the US has undergone an immense diversification process due to very high volumes of immigration, particularly but not limited to Latin America, Asia, and the Middle-East. Constant shifts in the nation’s demographics, coupled with an increasing number of minorities in society, have transformed the cultural and social fabric of the US. While the mainstream establishment views this newfound diversity among society as a strengthening and positive development, right-wing populist rhetoric argues otherwise; claiming that diversity and inclusiveness rampant within US society are a clear indication that the political elite have been trying to challenge the cultural norms and values that make an American, an American (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2019). Coincidentally, populist rhetoric also implies that two of the core elements of American norms and values are being white and Christian, even if it is done subtly (Moffitt, 2016). This perception of cultural displacement by the traditional white Christian portion of the American population has been intensified due to rapid pace of such demographic changes, since these changes were becoming more and more visible in public discourse. As a result, the immigration—particularly undocumented and illegal immigration—has been the core element of these increasing levels of public anxiety. In this context, right-wing populist rhetoric capitalized and amplified these concerns by framing immigration as not only an economic burden on the American public, but also a dangerously significant cultural threat (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 52). This narrative has often emphasized fears such as that immigrants undermine and damage social cohesion of the nation, that they are either unable or unwilling to assimilate, and that they try to fundamentally alter the cultural landscape. For many within the American society, especially among the working class and white Christians,

these fears are linked to broader insecurities, losing their social and political dominance and privileges for instance, in such diversifying society. For Trump and many other right-wing populists, values such as patriotism, Christianity—or Islam in the cases of Middle-Eastern populists—, and a perceived moral code are closely tied to traditional and conservative tendencies. By claiming that these values are under constant siege by liberal elites, their promotion of multiculturalism, diversity and political correctness, right-wing populists and populism supporters in general further deepen the scale of “*us versus them*” argument (Mudde, 2019).

The rise of right-wing populism within the US is also closely linked to growing political disillusionment and lack of trust, even when examined independently from the economic and cultural factors. For example, over the past few decades, particularly after the early 2000s, the US political system has been described as a dysfunctional and irreversibly polarized establishment by ordinary Americans. This perception can be attributed, perhaps, to partisan gridlock, which has become a central feature of the US political landscape. It is common—and to an extent, almost always expected—that elected officials prioritize party loyalty over practical, sensible, and meaningful governance. Unsurprisingly, this has led to an inability to pass tangible legislation on critical issues such as healthcare, freedom of information, economic inequality, or even excessive government expenditures. Consequently, the growth of public frustration and erosion of trust, which right-wing populism capitalizes on, is not surprising. In simple terms, many Americans already felt that the system was rigged at their expense: corrupt and dysfunctional. It was easy for right-wing populist rhetoric to exploit these sentiments and gain significant traction according to Reich, as he puts it:

“[...] emblematic of an abdication of public responsibility to maintain the health of our political-economic system at a time when a comparative few at the top have more power over it than at any other time in more than a century.” (Reich, 2020)

In summary for the US context, by emphasizing his connection to the “*common people*” or the “*ordinary American*” Trump managed to establish a personalized bond with many within American society, effectively shaping and using his rhetoric which resonated with those that believed the American political establishment; including

elites of both Democratic and Republican parties, had catastrophically failed to provide the people with respect, equality, prosperity and most importantly civil and political security (Reich, 2015; 2020). His populist appeal was not only due to his rhetoric being clear cut in terms of pointing out the establishment and corrupt elites as the core problem of US politics, but also his ability to appear as sincere, caring and thoughtful in his speeches. While he did not shy away from widespread concerns over economic, politic and social inequalities; he also fervently advocated for policies that would create new jobs, revive traditional and conservative American values and protect them against any and all corrupt, ineffective political elites in the system. Great number of American people—predominantly white Christian Americans—not only liked the idea of making America great again to some degree, but they believed it was only a “*guy*” like Trump (Rowland, 2019); which for all intents and purposes felt like someone like *them*, that could actually do it.

Another commonality among many right-wing populists is how often they criticize the role of legacy media—and to some extent social media—accusing news outlets and firms of being nothing more than partisan tools of the corrupt establishment (Reich, 2020). However, the surge in the importance of social media has become a crucial turning point for figures like Trump, effectively transforming it into a new way to amplify the narratives of right-wing populist rhetoric. For example, many social media platforms used daily by common people, such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube, have played a significant role in Trump's surging popularity (Rowland, 2019). Due to their informal and more natural structures, these platforms allow much more personalized ways to communicate with potential voters, essentially bypassing the need for a traditional media outlet intermediary. These legacy media organizations and platforms are often viewed as biased in favor of the establishment, or at the very least, out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. By bypassing legacy media altogether, Trump and many other right-wing populists around the world were able to—and still are able to—reach out to the general public, providing them with a sense of acknowledgment (Rowland, 2019). Accusing the legacy media of being gatekeepers, right-wing populists often attempts to delegitimize traditional journalism and by doing so, they often manage to frame their ideas and statements in ways that resonated with public frustrations, aligning with ordinary people. To put it simply, we can safely claim that the rise of right-wing populism in the US context has been fueled

by the media—both traditional legacy and new social media—and it enabled the spread of right-wing rhetoric to reach new heights (Ball and Roper, 2022; Reich, 2020, pp. 42-44). This development not only helped to gather support for populism but also significantly contributed to the polarization within the American society; which further contributed to right-wing narratives' attractiveness. Rather than having a positive impact upon the trust in the establishment, partisan news outlets and mainstream media slowly but steadily lost credibility in the eyes of ordinary people (Reich, 2020, pp. 42-44). Therefore, we can also argue that the rise of right-wing populism created a symbiotic relationship with immensely influential social media. This symbiotic relationship provides a platform for populists such as Trump to disseminate a narrative—regardless of being true or false—to dictate social, economic and political issues in a way that benefit them and their rhetoric.

For conclusion it can be said that particularly after early 2000s, a complex political, economic, and cultural void has risen in the US, in which right-wing populist Donald J. Trump after his 2016 presidential campaign successfully capitalized on and emerged as one of the most significant contemporary political figures to hold power in the international stage. His victory not only bolstered the strength of right-wing rhetoric within US, it also sent a clear signal to right-wing populists from different parts of the world: if it can be done in the United States, it can be done anywhere. Furthermore, this development also signified that the liberal democratic order can be beaten and replaced with more autocratic and oppressive orders. Which gave autocratic leaders more reason and opportunity to consolidate their power against liberal democratic institutions and movements in their corner of the world, without the fear of imminent liberal democratic United States repercussion (Ball and Roper, 2022, p. 879).

2.3.2. Populism in the Context of Europe

To understand the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, we can examine several countries and political figures. For the sake of fluidity and easier reading, countries and political figures that will be mentioned in this paragraph will have their own brief sections to analyze individually. Meanwhile this paragraph itself will be dedicated to pointing out the similarities between right-wing populist movements, political parties and populist leaders in different European nations. I have chosen the following: France,

with Marine Le Pen under ‘National Rally’; Italy, with Giorgia Meloni under ‘Brothers of Italy’; and lastly Hungary, with Viktor Orbán under Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union. Although located in different parts of Europe, with differing economic, cultural and political contexts, all of them share a similar rhetoric in line with right-wing populism in their political spheres on key European issues (Mudde, 2007, pp 21-25). By analyzing these European cases briefly, we can solidify our theoretical background in order to apply our findings for the Turkish context and reach much more concrete and dependable results.

Like the rise of right-wing populism in the US, one of the key drivers is the economy—or more precisely, the impact of globalization on European economies—which has caused a significant increase of economic disparity especially in the traditional industrial regions that depended on the income generated by domestic factories and workshops in order to effectively sustain themselves. Outsourcing and offshoring manufacturing jobs, due to their profitable nature for the individual establishments, steadily increased and left many blue-collar workers in distress and unemployed. On top of decreasing available jobs, many traditional key sectors such as textiles, coal, and steel industries also declined in both relevance and income generation, due to technological advances and geopolitical developments. For the working-class citizens in both Western and Eastern European nations—especially more developed countries—like United Kingdom, France, and Germany culminated in a significant increase of resentment towards the liberal political establishment (Mudde, 2007, pp. 21-25). In the European context, after the end of the Cold-War, both liberal democracies of Western Europe and newly emerging Eastern European nation states from the dissolved Soviet Union faced similar public resentments. While the old Western camp became preoccupied dealing with economic transformation and European integration processes brought by rapidly growing globalization trend, newly emerged Eastern European nation states was hit with national identity issues and crises.

For the liberal establishments of the West; Austria, France and Italy for example, the first cracks have appeared during this time frame. It is appropriate to say that first right-wing oriented populist parties emerged in these states. Sharing similar rhetoric and concerns, they focused on appealing to the *common folk* by targeting nationalist values and sentiments among the public. The Freedom Party in Austria and the National Front

in France capitalized on the vulnerable state of blue-collar workers and gained a sizeable following; while the Northern League in Italy also followed a similar path and rhetoric on top of delving further into anti-immigrant discourse (Mudde, 2007, pp. 157-158). It can also be argued that “*Euroscepticism*” also started to rapidly spread in EU countries by similar developments taking place in almost every single member state. Although it has not become a mainstream political movement yet, right-wing populism gained a stable foothold in the entire continent of Europe. Rising tensions between the majority and minorities as well as immigrants was a clear indication that right-wing populist rhetoric was able to carve a space for itself in European politics in the upcoming decades. While the mainstream liberal elites of the establishment were feeling content and politically secure due to the end of Cold-War period; they became stagnant in terms of addressing the public issues that eventually would result in widespread disillusionment and dissatisfaction with established political affairs (Mudde, 2007).

The political period of Europe from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the dawn of the 21st century could be dubbed as “emergence in Europe’s political stage” era for right-wing populism. While not fully capable of replacing the mainstream liberal political institutions and establishment yet, its emergence set motion for much greater and radical changes in political sphere of liberal establishment and ideas in the upcoming decades. With several disturbances around the globe such as the Gulf War (1990-1991) indirectly effecting migration patterns for displaced populations and minorities, it can also be argued that 1990s truly paved the way for populist rhetoric to influence steadily becoming more agitated European working-class. Sudden surge in right-wing populist parties’ popularities in the next decade is a clear indicator of this claim. It can be stated that from the early 2000s it became crystal clear for many political analysts and scholars that right-wing populism was not going anywhere—in terms of popularity and relevance—anytime soon (Mudde, 2007, pp. 21-25). While the existence and subsequent persistence of populist parties and leaders in political sphere was observable in many European nations before, 2000s marked a new period which we can call as the populist consolidation (Inglehart and Norris, 2019). Mainly due to economic discontent caused by globalization, formerly solidified liberal establishments in EU that traditionally aligned with social-democratic or liberal-democratic governmental norms and ideals also began to experience a sudden increase

and consolidation of right-wing orientation from rural and blue-collar worker citizens (Mudde, 2019).

While the issue of immigration would have significantly larger impact on the rise of populism in the 2010s due to arising migrant crises, economic and social devastations and subsequent public dissatisfactions caused by globalization were the main drivers in this period (Inglehart and Norris, 2019, pp. 19-21). Eurosceptic populist rhetoric began to gain significant legitimacy in the eyes of the most affected portions of European society in which they started to view EU's governing structures, their democratic decision-making processes, and overall efficiency as insufficient and corrupt. The establishment started to get heavy opposition from right-wing aligned voters and citizens as the key emotional separations began to emerge within societies. Populist rhetoric was successful in creating this heavy opposition and establish itself in EU politics, mainly with arguments such as the loss of unique cultural identities, loss of political and social autonomies and self-serving system of EU establishment at the expense of common Europeans (Mudde, 2007). Eurosceptic populists claimed that because EU is a supranational and intergovernmental organization it could only benefit when the member states compromise on their own autonomies. By also arguing against the legislative, political and judiciary powers of certain supranational organizations over the individual European nations—such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and European Union as a whole—they managed to convince their followers to view these types of liberal establishment institutions as out of touch and with common folk and corrupted by the liberal elites (Mudde, 2019). While not being completely against European cooperation in terms of trade agreements and migration between European nations, populist rhetoric often disapproved and argued against issues and topics such as monetary union, environmental and international laws, and fiscal austerity measures in favor of the betterment of EU (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

This erosion of trust in both political elites and institutions of the establishment kept on growing within EU citizenry. As many Europeans have become disillusioned and frustrated, inability and inaction from the establishment further added more fuel to confusions and concerns of ordinary people. As Mudde (2017) puts it:

“... it is important to consider the second condition that facilitates the activation of populist sentiments among the population: elite unresponsiveness. In many western European countries the established parties have prioritized responsibility over representation and have countered the consequent loss of public support by political cartels, often with the explicit argument to keep populist parties out of power.” (Mudde, 2017)

This has become more apparent in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis—just like in the case of the United States—as aforementioned policies like austerity measures imposed on individual European nations by the EU were perceived to have a disproportionate effect on most vulnerable portions of European society (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). In such political and economic environment populist movements and leaders capitalized on this emerging discontent; carefully positioning themselves as the champions of the common people that stood for their rights and economic betterments against the corrupt political establishment. Portraying the establishment and political elites as corrupt, self-serving elites that are incapable of serving those who voted them in power, populist movements managed to create much broader and everlasting anti-establishment sentiments (Mudde, 2007 p. 157). While attacking almost every aspect of this liberal establishment, they carefully framed their own actions as legitimate measures for the survival of democracy. Combining and opposing many political, economic and social flaws of the establishment in their rhetoric, populists emerged as the new challengers in European political sphere. It would be wrong to not point out the similarities between the American and European cases in terms of the rise of right-wing populism. Mudde offers the following advice to “liberal elites” for them to defend liberal democracy:

“In trying to win over populist supporters, and perhaps even some elites, liberal democrats should avoid both simplistic solutions that pander to “the people” and elitist discourses that dismiss the moral and intellectual competence of ordinary citizens—both will only strengthen the populists. Most importantly, given that populism often asks the right questions but provides the wrong answers, the ultimate goal should be not just the destruction of populist supply, but also the weakening of populist demand.

Only the latter will actually strengthen the liberal democracy.” (Mudde, 2017)

As Cas Mudde points many aspects and reasons of this rise in his several academic works (2007, 2012, 2017); even when different societies are in different continents, due to their similar—or at the very least non-mutually exclusive—governmental structures and cultural values we can fully observe how same type of political and social developments took place. He discusses how the rise of right-wing populism occurred both in Europe and US, and they share notable factors such as economic instability, immigration and generalized distrust in political elites of the establishment. He often than not emphasized that such populist movements are able to create positive popularity traction especially when there is an economic downturn or cultural dislocation. In both of these regions, he argued, populist figures harnessed the already growing resentments and negative sentiments of the public meanwhile framing themselves as the last bastion of national and cultural identities. Therefore, it can be argued that according to scholars like Mudde; right-wing populism is not only viable in failing nations and during cultural crises, but it is also viable and may be even more appealing in more developed nations. According to him, populists are capable manipulators who can talk and act in politics as an ordinary person while denying the obvious fact that them also being part of the elite within the establishment. In his words:

“Populism alludes to amateurish and unprofessional political behavior that aims to maximize media attention and popular support. By disrespecting the dress code and language manner, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also courageous leaders who stand with ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’.” (Mudde, 2017)

The 2010s can be classified as the peak of right-wing populism in the context of Europe. Especially due to significant increase of non-European immigration to EU, nationalist sentiments as well as fears of declining cultural values and norms began to fester within many Europeans—similarly to the situation in US, white Christian traditionalists were among the first groups of peoples that shared these attitudes—and

a subsequent surge of right-wing populism is observed. One of the key issues of such people towards the establishment was the absolute failure—in their eyes and worldviews of course—of the EU’s handling of economic and refugee crises. While ordinary EU citizens that were especially in economic decline because of rising unemployment, witnessing the “*establishment*” offering a “*helping hand*” towards people that did not resemble “*them*”, neither culturally nor to a great extent religiously, pushed many of them over the edge, removing any remaining piece of hope and trust towards the establishment (Mudde, 2017). Right-wing populist rhetoric and political figures who effectively used them could, and did, capitalize heavily under the circumstances. Particularly around 2015 and onwards, the immigration crisis has peaked in the EU due to regional civil wars in many parts of Middle-East, Africa, and Asia; causing an immigration wave to Europe. Right-wing populists were highly successful in capitalizing on this and used their rhetoric to demonize and alienate migrating minority groups such as Afghans and Syrians in the eyes of their respective societies. Anne Appelbaum explains this in her book *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* in rather simple terms:

“The intellectuals and ideologues behind these new movements have now found a set of issues they can unite around—issues that work across borders are easy to sell online. Opposition to immigration, especially Muslim immigration, both real and imagined, is one of them; promotion of socially conservative, religious worldview is another. Sometimes, opposition to the EU, or to international institutions more generally, is a third.” (Appelbaum, 2020)

To get a better understanding on how growing immigration caused by globalization affected the rise of right-wing in Europe, I will now briefly examine several EU member states as case examples beginning with France, as it is a great candidate in terms of viewing how aforementioned issues brought by globalization perpetuated the rise of right-wing populism. Since it is a highly advanced and developed nation located in western Europe, France has suffered significantly in terms of rapid deindustrialization and subsequent losses of blue-collar jobs, stagnation of wages, resulting in a strong sense of economic insecurity and frustration among the French population. Marine Le Pen, a prominent right-wing populist figure in French politics

in the last two decades (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, p. 9), capitalized on these frustrations and formulated a narrative that put the blame on multinational corporations and supranational organizations; arguing that these institutions are knowingly and willingly undermining national industries and working-class citizens of France's interests and livelihoods. Her populist rhetoric clearly resonated with *the people*, growing her voter and supporter base after she assumed the party leadership, by creating an imagined bond with herself and the common people. In terms of gaining public approval, it can be said that Le Pen follows the playbook of a patient yet firm populist to the letter. With continuously asserting herself as the *champion* of the *common folk*, she keeps the liberal establishment under constant siege with criticisms. In addition to her economic and political discourse, she constantly makes remarks about cultural concerns. Portraying immigration as the primary source of rampant crime and social breakdown within France, she emphasizes the importance of preserving what means to be "*French*". In her arguments we often find remarks on French culture, language, traditions, and values; and how immigration is steadily corrupting them bit by bit (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, p.11). Her fearmongering rhetoric which is not limited to France itself, but to almost all European citizens is quite evident:

"Western Europe is not immune to this type of historical reconfiguration.."

(Le Pen, 2017)¹

Although still not being able to come to power in France, Le Pen's persistence in French political sphere is a great case example. Her ability to tie the negative effects of globalization with political establishment and elites gave legitimacy to her right-wing populist rhetoric in the eyes of the vulnerable common people. While portraying the elites as corrupt and out-of-touch with the people, she resonated with the economically depressed voters as well as traditionally right-aligned urban French population. Causing widespread negativity towards immigration played a significant role to create a perceived and feared enemy in the eyes of the common folk; even if the reasoning is imaginary. As Anne Applebaum states:

¹ Source: Marine Le Pen on immigration (April 9, 2017)

“When people say they are angry about “immigration,” in other words, they are not always talking about something they have lived and experienced. They are talking about something imaginary, something they fear.” (Applebaum, 2020)

When compared with France, Italy seems like a very similar case in the first glance. However, there is also a regional aspect within Italy that played—which still plays to this day—significant role. Northern Italy historically have been the more developed and more advanced region in comparison with southern Italy. In more recent centuries, this disproportion led to economic separation between the north and the south, where the more industrialized and developed north fared much better. However, when globalization began, it was mainly the north that suffer the most due to influx of cheap goods and international competition (Colantone and Stanig, 2018, p. 201). Unsurprisingly, this also led to deindustrialization similar to the French case, where many blue-collar workers lost their jobs and livelihoods. Manufacturing sector suffered significantly, especially more traditional workshops run by single or collective families; as well as the entire textile industry. Because the northern Italy was dependent on the existence of a growing industrial sector in order to keep building its wealth, globalization marked a significant turning point for many living in the region. Coupled with increasing immigration and cultural upheavals, a crisis loomed on the horizon for Italy which would eventually culminate in the rise of right-wing populism (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, pp. 15-16). On the reason why populist rhetoric was able to grow in influence Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya further states:

“With the traditional left no longer able to capture growing popular discontent, a golden opportunity arose for an enterprising political force. This force tuned out to be populism.” (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, p. 9)

Rising immigration, particularly the migration crisis during mid-2010s, has been a key issue in Italian politics. Due to its geographical location and historical contact with Africa and Middle-East, Italy experienced a surge of immigration and refugees, further fueling the fears of cultural displacement and decline on top of strained state and public resources. While economic and political right-wing populist rhetoric was already effective in the northern part of the country, southern regions of Italy that faced much

higher volume of immigration also allowed populists such as Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni to gain significant support. They unsurprisingly framed—just like many other European populists—the immigration as a direct and devastating threat to both Italian identity and security, while also promoting the traditional values such as being Christian, white, and European as anchors of their rhetoric. In Hanspeter Kriesi's words:

“[...] cultural diversity has the potential to create new political conflicts which transcend the conflicts produced in the course of industrialization and of creating the West European nation state. The groups in this the resident population who feel threatened by the increasing cultural diversity seek to defend their traditional way of life.” (Kriesi et al., 2008, p. 14)

Furthermore, increasing mistrust of the public towards the establishment and political entities both within Italy and EU resulted in them being framed and viewed as corrupt, ineffective, out-of-touch, and outright oppressive; leading to a general decrease of support and approval. Right-wing populism, thus, acted as the “last remaining sanctuary” for common, hardworking folk. *Lega Nord's* (under Matteo Salvini) and *Fratelli d'Italia's* (under Giorgia Meloni) success against the establishment is also quite easy to grasp when we consider this loss of legitimacy of the established institutions. According to Hanspeter Kriesi, it can be stated as:

“This legacy of support for multiculturalism severely limits its ability to appeal to the ‘losers’, given that the ‘losers’ are feeling particularly threatened by the cultural diversity resulting from increasing immigration of populations from culturally very distant origins.” (Kriesi et al., 2008, p. 19)

Additionally, he summarizes:

“As a result of this dilemma, the radical populist right exerts a strong appeal to the working class, which has massively turned to this type of party across Western Europe. This appeal is reinforced by the fact that

economic populism and welfare chauvinism of the populist right have also proven to be highly attractive to West European working-class voters.”
(Kriesi et al., 2008, p. 19)

It should also be pointed out that unlike in the French case, right-wing populism not only risen in prominence but actually managed to gain solidified control over Italy under Meloni in recent times. Her rhetoric emphasized the importance of “god, homeland, and family” which obviously contributed to populist sentiments. While managing to leverage the idea that all the problems that ordinary Italians were facing were caused by globalization and its institutions, she successfully placed herself in the highest place of power within Italy. Even though she utilized privileges and freedoms provided by the liberal establishment—such as freedom of speech and right to take part in public affairs and elections—she continued her anti-establishment rhetoric to this day in order to solidify her position and legitimacy. A direct and famous quote from Meloni: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian. No one will take that away from me [...]”² provides a clear illustration of her deliberate targeting the establishment in order to “fire-up” her supporters’ fervent (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 106). Her claims of Europe being under siege by “*religious Islamist immigrants*”, “*woke ideologies*” of the left, as well as “*LGBT lobbies*” definitively resonated with ordinary Italians, which resulted in her popularity growth that eventually led to her being elected as the first woman Prime Minister of Italy. Although Italian politics always had an influential center-right and right-wing presence and influence for several decades, the accomplishment of Meloni and her right-wing coalition’s success perhaps marks a pivotal point in both European and Italian political sphere for the upcoming decades.

While the previous cases provide us with a better understanding of how liberal establishment was challenged by populists, Hungary, due to former communist rule until 1989, is immensely important to analyze in order to understand how transitioning from a socialist political and economic model affects right-wing populism. With the eventual fall of communist regime, Hungary experienced a volatile period in which a rapid and unstable transition to democracy and capitalist economy took place. Even

² Source: Giorgia Meloni at a political rally in 2019

though this meant that Hungary has become exposed to international economy and trade and significantly benefitted due to income generated by foreign investments and privatization; it also created uncertain and unstable political and social spheres (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, p. 7). While globalization significantly contributed to national economy at first, by bolstering sectors like manufacturing, it soon started to have similar effects upon the blue-collar Hungarian workers similar to French and Italian cases. As the traditional industries declined and started to cause unemployment, many Hungarian citizens started to feel increasing economic strains—particularly those who lived outside urban areas—placed upon them by their nations rapidly globalizing economy. Furthermore, as the economic inequalities between rural and urban populations widened, a communal sense of injustice began to fester within the negatively affected individuals. Soon, these individual resentments grew so much that right-wing populism was able to carve a space for itself in a post-communist nation (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019, pp. 7-13).

During this decline in trust in the establishment, the primary Hungarian right-wing populist Viktor Orbán began to emerge as the key figure in national politics. Fidesz, led by Orbán managed to take power in Hungary firstly in 1998 after winning the parliamentary elections. Although first term of Fidesz was cut short due to losing power to a coalition of left-wing oriented coalition in 2002, Orbán and Fidesz continued to challenge the establishment by continuous barrages of populist and inflammatory rhetoric. While its popularity and support base started to grow steadily during 2000s, it eventually culminated in a decisive victory in 2010 when Fidesz secured two-thirds supermajority in the Parliament. Effectively becoming the dominant ruling party in Hungary while Orbán also starting his second term as Prime Minister, Fidesz started to implement sweeping constitutional and institutional reforms in line with its right-wing populist rhetoric (Gross, 2023, pp. 489-491). On the other hand, although Hungary was not directly hit with a significant immigration from Middle-East or Africa, constant populist-fearmongering rhetoric by Orbán managed to push anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic sentiments *en-masse* which proved immensely successful particularly after 2015 and onwards. In his work, Stephen Gross cites Douglass Weber as:

*“[...] and some already had right-wing populist parties in power, like Hungary, which cast this new wave of migration as a threat to an imagined white, Christian nation.”*³ (Gross, 2023 p. 493)

Since 2014 he managed to get re-elected as Prime Minister in Hungarian elections at the head of Fidesz and became Hungary's longest-serving PM with clear indications that he will continue to do so in the upcoming years. His popularity and public approval are both dependent and strengthened by right-wing populist rhetoric, agendas and legislations and he is still one of the most well-known and outspoken advocates of anti-EU and anti-establishment sentiments. Orbán's constant attempts and arguments against European integration and EU as an institution is met with widespread acceptance and praise by mainly blue-collar workers as well as traditional and conservative circles that also place ideas such as national integrity, identity, religion and values above liberal beliefs (Inglehart and Norris, 2019). His statements on these topics are almost always observable, making it clear that right-wing populist approach and rhetoric is an immensely important tool for Orbán to maintain his “savior” like image. Taking a look at his speeches such as: *“Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity.”*, *“A nation which expects its biological survival from immigrants won't survive.”*, *“If you are not able to provide security for your own country, how can you guarantee liberties?”*⁴ makes it obvious that he portrays himself as a strong and dependable leader who can be trusted to act as defender of the righteous citizens of Hungary.

To conclude, it can be said that right-wing populism in the contexts of both the US and Europe shares many similarities in terms of key characteristics, their origins, and tendencies. Populist leaders such as Trump, Le Pen, and Orbán all utilize populist discourses by creating a symbiotic relationship between their rhetoric and their respective right-wing ideologies. By establishing the theoretical framework for this flexible and adaptable nature of populism in this chapter, depending on the context and political climate of course, gives us the ability to review and analyze contemporary Turkish politics in-depth in the following chapters.

³ Source: Douglass Webber, *European Disintegration: The Politics of Crisis in the European Union* (London: Springer, 2019), 135– 76

⁴ Source: Viktor Orbán's speeches in both domestic and international platforms.

2.4. Theoretical Application to the Turkish Context

As a hybrid regime between democracy and authoritarianism, Turkey is an immensely valid candidate to apply this theoretical framework to gain valuable insights on both Turkish politics and right-wing populism in general. Similarly to the cases examined above in this section; nationalism, religion, conservatism, democratic backsliding, and anti-elitist sentiments are on the rise within the Turkish political landscape, which could be further analyzed historically to determine the contextual roots of the rise of right-wing. For this reason, the following chapter will focus on right-wing politics in Turkey, analyzing the historical development of Turkish right-wing populism and build upon the theoretical framework established in this chapter.



CHAPTER 3: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TURKISH RIGHT

Understanding the historical context is essential for analyzing contemporary right-wing populism in Turkey, as it helps explain the ideological roots, social dynamics, and emerging narratives which shape contemporary Turkish politics as a whole. Since right-wing populist movements do not emerge in isolation as explained in the previous chapter—and they build on historical experiences, ideological traditions, and past and current political struggles—, in the context of Turkey, right-wing populism has been shaped by key historical themes such as nationalism, Islamic conservatism, anti-establishment sentiments, and overabundance of populist rhetoric. As these populist discourses predominantly revolve around several key themes—examined in the theoretical framework section—, such as nationalism, Islamic conservatism, and anti-establishment sentiments, introducing and briefly explaining these themes in the context of Turkey is critical. Therefore, about the theme of “nationalism”, it can be said that Turkish right-wing politics and right-wing populism is deeply influenced by ethnic-nationalist ideology, which has its roots going as far as late Ottoman era. These nationalist tendencies initially emerged as a response to perceived external and internal threats to both Ottoman and Republican administrations, where ethnic nationalism played a unifying role for the public. Similarly, Islamic conservatism was, and still is, in a dominant position to influence right-wing politics. Especially after the establishment of the Republic, political Islam and Islamic conservatism entered in a constant clash against the secular nature of the state, where it could heavily influence right-wing discourses via religious tendencies. *Milli Görüş* movement, for example, was and still is one of the most prominent right-wing Islamist ideologies which benefits from populism and populist rhetoric even in the contemporary Turkish politics. Benefiting from the existence of both nationalist and Islamist tendencies, anti-establishment sentiments are also in abundance, where right-wing populists throughout Turkish political history took advantage of and utilized as a political tool via populist discourses, criticizing the bureaucracy, judiciary, military, and overarching Western-oriented nature of the Republic. In combination with these key themes, right-wing populist rhetoric often formulates its “us versus them” narratives

in line with Mudde's definition, portraying their chosen internal or external targets as threats to both nation itself, and the country's sovereignty.

As is evident, understanding the Turkish historical context is imperative in order to gain valid insights into why contemporary right-wing populism in Turkey has taken its current form. Thus, to understand the dynamic behind nationalism, Islamic conservatism, and anti-establishment sentiments and recent rise of right-wing populism, an in-depth analysis of this historical background is needed, and this chapter is mainly concerned with reviewing these aforementioned periods to achieve that.

3.1. Ottoman Legacy and the Roots of Turkish Right-Wing Politics

As briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, late Ottoman legacy and cultural conservatism have significantly shaped modern Turkish right-wing ideologies, with its roots tracing back to the late Ottoman period and early Republican era. In this period, pre-modern Islamic conservatism emerged as a reaction to Westernization efforts during the Tanzimat Era and later Young Turk movements, while Turkish nationalism developed as a strategy to counter ethnic separatism and foreign intervention (VanDuinkerken, 1998, p. 3). Although neither approach prevented the Ottoman Empire's collapse, both had everlasting impacts on the Turkish nation-state. Amid growing ethnic tensions and social unrest in the early 20th century, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) seized power through a military coup in 1913. Under the leadership of "Three Pashas" (Enver Paşa, Talat Paşa, and Cemal Paşa), Turkish nationalism became the dominant state ideology, leading to several Turkification policies which marginalized ethnic and religious minorities (Semiz, 2014, pp. 229-230). The CUP's administration ultimately played a key role in the Ottoman Empire's entry into First World War on the losing German side, hastening its final dissolution.

Following the 'First World War' and the 'Turkish War of Independence', led by Mustafa Kemal Paşa—who would later become the founding father of the new nation-state and adopt the surname “Atatürk”—the Republic of Turkey was established. This transformation from a *multi-cultural* and *multi-religious* entity to a *nation-state* was not without problems, to say the least. While nationalist sentiments were compatible—it was even a key pillar of what we call *The Six Arrows of Kemalism* today—with

Atatürk's vision for the new republic, Islamic conservatism and fundamentalism which were widespread since the late Ottoman era proved very difficult. On this topic Tamer Balcı (2012) wrote:

“Atatürk’s path to create a secular Turkish nation-state had several obstacles. In the 1920s the majority of people in Turkey had a religious identity rather than a national identity.” (Balcı, 2012, p. 37)

While the promotion of Islamic conservatism may have been a practical strategy to maintain unity within an empire composed of diverse yet predominantly Muslim ethnic groups such as Arabs, the transition to a real ‘nation-state’ after losing most of these minorities presented immense challenges to the new republic. Islam as a religion became somewhat of an ‘*obstacle*’ to forge a national identity that is solely based on ‘*Turkishness*’. Although Islam was not institutionally and systematically demonized by the new establishment, efforts were made to curb its influence over the general Turkish population. For example, to achieve this, we can point out the formation of Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Arslan and Turner, 2013, p. 206). By securing institutional influence and power over religious affairs and diminishing the autonomy of Islam, the new republic aimed to block potential religious upheavals, and ‘enlighten’ the Turkish society about religion (Arslan and Turner, 2013, p. 207). On the topic of the pivotal role of Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkish Republic, Berna Zengin Arslan and Bryan Stanley Turner (2013) says:

“To put it differently, we suggest that the Turkish state’s engagement with the field of religion has not been a case of flawed secularism, but on the contrary an example that fulfilled the basic practice of the secular nation-state — that is, to manage or govern religion in the name of national security and social unity.” (Arslan and Turner, 2013, p. 208)

Nevertheless, Islamic conservatism and Turkish nationalism would remain highly influential for the emergence of populism (Aytürk, 2014), and would become the very essence of Turkish right-wing politics in both 20th and 21st centuries. As an example of the emergence of these Islamic and nationalist discourses in a right-populist form,

the Democrat Party, which was in power between 1950 and 1960, and its prime minister at the time, Adnan Menderes can be mentioned. Eroğul (2019, p. 191) argued that a speech Menderes has given in Trabzon in 1957, we can observe how effective populist rhetoric may become when utilized with Islam-oriented worldview and discourse. As Eroğul provides in his book, Menderes says “my dear people of Trabzon, we are ready to do everything we can to serve you, and be a servant (kul) of you” in his speech while also accusing the opposition party (RPP) and its members for being self-interested and lustful for power, instead of being in favor of the general will of *the people*. Eroğul (2019) also argued that while DP utilized Islamic conservatism and Turkish nationalism to some extent in order to capture the masses, this populist rhetoric also pushed the party and Menderes in particular, toward far right and authoritarianism, and undermined the democratic principles of the republic severely. Ultimately, this example fits Cas Mudde’s definition and explanation of populism in which the symbiotic relationship between populist rhetoric and right-wing ideologies is apparent. Even the primary slogan of the DP in 1950 “**Enough! The word belongs to the nation!**” is a prime example of populist rhetoric intertwined with right-wing discourse. Laleoğlu (2023) argued that this particular slogan is unquestionably populist, as it constructs the binary opposition between “*the pure people*” and “*the corrupt elites*” by defining “*the nation*” in stark contrast to “*the authoritarian, self-serving, and elitist RPP bureaucrats*” in line with Mudde’s definition.

Laleoğlu (2023) further pointed out that during his political career, Süleyman Demirel, adopted a defined and rigid conservative-nationalist approach and portrayed the representatives of left-wing ideologies, both domestic and international, as enemies of the people. Turgut Özal, similarly, presented his socially conservative but economically liberal views through the concept of “national will”, by framing it as the only true opinion and desire of the common people. Laleoğlu interpreted that this “national will” discourse of Özal means that whoever emerges victorious from the elections is the most legitimate, and is the one and only representative of the nation as a whole. According to Laleoğlu (2023), especially in the 1990s, Erbakan also established a distinct form of populism by the concepts of “Just Order” (*adil düzen*) and “National View” (*Milli Görüş*), blending Islamic values and ideas with populist rhetoric. Laleoğlu argued that Erbakan made a clear distinction between “*the people*” and “*their enemies*” via Islamic and economic references. The people in Erbakan’s

context meant the pure, innocent Muslims while the enemies encompassed the Zionist Western nations, Israel, and their supporters who exploited the Muslims by systemic injustices and oppressions.

In contemporary times, with the global rise of right-wing popularity, anti-establishment sentiments, religious values, nationalism, and conservatism have once again risen to prominence. Because of this development, populism as a thin-centered ideology also experienced a sudden surge in modern Turkish politics. Islamic revivalism, nationalism, and even anti-Kemalist sentiments dominate right-wing politics, with different political parties representing them separately, but all these political entities' rhetoric and statements fall in line with Mudde's (2004, 2017) definition of populism and his distinction of "people" versus "elites" in different shapes or forms according to their individual contexts. However, to fully understand the contemporary Turkish right-wing politics, a comprehensive examination of historical background of republican politics is needed, to determine and classify the JDP, NWP, and the VP with accuracy.

3.2. Early Republican Era (1923-1946) and Kemalist Reforms

From the early days of the Republic until the end of the Second World War, numerous Kemalist reforms reshaped Turkey's political, social, and cultural landscape. Efforts to secularize the state, such as the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, which provoked strong reactions from conservative and religious segments of society, who saw these changes as attacks on their cultural and religious heritage. Accordingly, resentment and distrust toward the new establishment emerged immediately after the Republic's declaration, as Turkish society, shaped by the late Ottoman legacy, struggled to separate its national identity from Islam. The establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs failed to appease conservative circles, many of whom rejected the idea that it could replace the Caliphate's role (Eraslan, 2001, p. 350). Additionally, the rapid closure of religious schools (medreses) and courts in favor of a secular legal system based on European standards intensified tensions. As a result, growing resentment first took root among rural, devoutly Muslim communities who felt marginalized by the new regime (Eraslan, 2001, pp. 350-352).

Even reforms and laws which were not inherently anti-Islam were perceived as harmful to Turkish traditions and values by religious conservatives. For instance, the 1926 Civil Code, which granted women rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance, was seen as a contradiction to Islamic tradition and established norms of the Turkish society. While this reform stemmed from the abolishment of Islamic polygamy and Sharia-based family laws, its primary aim was to expedite nation-building, not attack religion itself (Kurtulgan, 2018, p. 173). Another example is Law No. 671, the "Şapka Kanunu" of 1925, which prohibited Turkish government employees and public figures from wearing the fez. Although the fez was not overtly religious, it had become a symbol of the Ottoman-Islamic establishment. This law, rather than targeting religious values, aimed to distance the new regime from the semi-theocratic Ottoman state (Şenel, 2003, p. 85). The regime sought to establish a new cultural and social identity to prevent a return to Ottoman-Islamist ideals. While urban citizens adapted quickly, conservative groups, especially in rural areas, opposed the law, viewing it as an attack on Islamic traditions and their identity. In simple terms Kürşat Kurtulgan explains the importance of such reforms, particularly the Civil Code as:

"With the Civil Code, all laws are enforced equally on all citizens of Turkish republic and unity in law is ensured. Secular state approach was adapted to law system. For this purpose, law systems implemented in Europe are examined and after determining the appropriate ones, they are regulated and incorporated into Turkish law system." (Kurtulgan, 2018, p. 176)

These sudden political and social changes sparked violent opposition, such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925. This uprising, the most significant of its kind in the republic's history, took place in the eastern provinces of Diyarbakır, Elazığ, and Bitlis—areas which are predominantly inhabited by ethnic Kurds—. Although the rebellion's stated goal was the restoration of the Caliphate and the establishment of an Islamic regime (Çoban, 2022, p. 43), it also had an ethnic-nationalist dimension, making it both anti-establishment and Islamic-conservative in its nature. The Sheikh Said Rebellion had a lasting impact on both Turkey's political and social landscape. It reinforced the Kemalist regime's fears of Islamic groups as significant threats to a modern-secular state, while consolidating pro-establishment support, particularly in

urban areas. This may be seen as one of the first signs of social division and polarization. Although the rebellion was swiftly suppressed, it served as a symbol for both Kurdish separatist movements and conservative-Islamist groups, who used it to rally opposition to the establishment (Özoğlu, 2009, p. 183). Additionally, the rebellion strengthened the ties between the republican government and the Turkish Armed Forces, which would continue to play a pivotal role in Turkish politics throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. By crushing the rebellion, the Republic consolidated its power, deterred widespread revolt, and silenced political and social opposition for the time being (Özoğlu, 2009, pp. 183-184).

The Sheikh Said Rebellion also directly led to the banning and dissolution of the Progressive Republican Party (PRP), the first organized opposition party in the republican era (Zürcher, 2021, p. 4). Founded by prominent figures like Kazım Karabekir and Ali Fuat Cebesoy—who had been close associates of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk for many years—the PRP represented a pro-decentralist and pro-liberal opposition to the Republican People's Party (RPP). While advocating for a more liberal political environment and democracy, it also emphasized respect for traditional and religious values (Kili, 1982, p. 161). This made the PRP attractive to conservative and Islamist circles, particularly in rural areas, who were opposed to the RPP's secular policies. Fearing that these groups sought to challenge the secular republican establishment, the government issued a decree on 3 June 1925, closing all PRP offices nationwide (Ateş, 1980, p. 282). The following is from Hakan Özoğlu's (2009) article which provides us with a direct text from this decree:

“During the [prosecutions] and trials of the Independence Tribunal of Diyarbakır it has been established that official representatives of the Progressive Republican Party have used the principle of respect for religious ideas and beliefs, included in the party program, as a means to gain support for the propaganda of reactionaries who pretend to save the country from atheists and that this has led to many serious incidents during the manifestations of the latest [Sheikh Said] insurrection. [...] Under these circumstances, it is impossible to allow a movement aimed at the use of religion for political purposes to exist.” (Özoğlu, 2009, p. 206)

It is evident that the ruling Republican People's Party (RPP) was open to the idea of a legal political opposition but was deeply concerned that Islamic conservatives and reactionaries hostile to the new establishment might seize control of such opposition (Akşin, 2006, pp. 180-181). This concern was heightened by the PRP's religious propaganda and manipulations after its founding, which intensified the elite's anxieties. The nationwide shutdown of the PRP worsened already strained relations between the establishment and rural areas, deepening discontent and rejection of the administration in many regions (Zürcher, 2013, pp. 259-260).

Growing resentment towards the RPP government threatened the stability of the republic, and the government recognized this. To ease growing tensions between the people and the establishment, the government attempted to transition into a multi-party system. Many officials, including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself, believed a controlled liberal-leaning opposition was essential to bridging the gap between the public and the state (Lewis, 1991, p. 279). On August 12, 1930, the Liberal Republican Party (LRP) was established by Fethi Okyar at Atatürk's request. Initially seen as a positive development, the LRP quickly became a rallying point for anti-establishment conservatives and reactionaries. Instead of representing a liberal opposition, it followed the same path as the PRP and was disbanded by Okyar after only three months. This marked the second and final attempt during Atatürk's lifetime to establish a multi-party system, which disappointed both him and many in the political sphere (İpekçi, 1968, p. 28). The failures of the PRP and LRP especially upset rural citizens who held their religious and traditional values dear. The inability of the new regime to create space for these individuals can be seen as the beginning of anti-establishment and anti-secular sentiments in Turkish right-wing politics.

Even though such shortcomings in the attempts of democratization by the RPP elites, I am inclined to argue that Duverger's classification of Turkey's single-party regime during this era as "tutelary" or "potential democracy" (1959, p. 280) is suitable, instead of directly labeling this period as "non-democratic" or outright "authoritarian". The reasoning behind my statement can be better understood by Duverger's own words:

"[...] some single parties are not really totalitarian either in ideas or in organization. The best example of this is provided by the People's

Republican Party, which operated in Turkey from 1923 to 1946 as a single-party. Its first claim to originality lay in its democratic ideology. In no way did it set itself up as an Order or a Church like its fascist and Communist brethren. It imposed on its members neither faith nor mystique: the revolution of Kemal was essentially pragmatic. Its task was to 'Westernize' Turkey by fighting the prime obstacle to any modernization amongst the peoples of the Middle East; that is Islam. The anti-clericalism and rationalism of the leading strata of the party gave it a definite resemblance to nineteenth-century Liberalism: even their nationalism was not very different from that which convulsed Europe in 1848." (Duverger, 1959, p. 276)

Single-party era of Turkey, thus, should not be categorized as an oppressive period that contradicted its establishment's core democratic principles; but should be analyzed as a turbulent yet determined democratization process. Tarık Zafer Tunaya also argues in favor of this statement, according to him:

"In some cases, a single political party goes as far as declaring that it serves a temporary function, leading the country towards a more democratic and modern system. [...] This particular sort of single-party regime is not and cannot be totalitarian. And as it sets the stage for democracy, it also prepares its own demise. The Kuomintang in China and CHP in Turkey are examples of this sort of single-party." (Tunaya, 1966, pp. 208-209)

In summary, the semi-authoritarian policies and laws of the single-party period aimed to secure the republic's democratic nature, shield it from reactionary religious influences, and prepare the nation for democracy when feasible. Although this transition took time, at that time, it was deemed necessary by the ruling elites. Furthermore, the period between the failed second attempt at a multi-party system and the end of the Second World War was marked by economic hardships and growing unrest among rural and Islamic conservative groups, and their dissatisfaction with the establishment and the government stemmed from a lack of political representation and discontent with the pro-secular nature of the republic (Angrist, 2000, pp. 151-154),

which was generally perceived as self-serving and oppressive by the aforementioned circles within the Turkish society.

3.3. The Democrat Party Era (1946-1960) and the Rise of Right-Wing

The transition to a multi-party system after more than two decades of single-party rule is a critical moment in Turkish political history, as this shift was not solely driven by RPP elites seeking to finalize Turkey's democratization (Dokuyan, 2014, pp. 159-160), but also by external pressures from the Western bloc. By 1946, RPP's semi-authoritarian policies had deepened polarization, particularly among rural conservative-Islamist groups. Economic hardships from the Second World War further fueled dissatisfaction within the society, especially among business elites critical of the government. Additionally, Turkey's alignment with the victorious Western bloc necessitated many democratic reforms to secure their support; such as qualifying for the Marshall Plan (Uzunkaya, 2019, p. 180). Facing both internal unrest and external pressures, RPP ushered Turkey into a new era of political democratization and pluralism in the mid-1940s.

This led to the formation of the Democrat Party (DP) in 1946 by several former RPP members, including Celal Bayar and Adnan Menderes (Dokuyan, 2014, p. 159). DP's main criticisms of the establishment mainly centered on the lack of economic liberalization, restrictions on religious practices, limited political freedoms, and overall semi-authoritarian governance. While DP quickly gained popularity among rural populations—similar to the PRP and LRP—due to its stance on secular policies, it also attracted small business owners with its liberal economic approach (Dokuyan, 2014, pp. 162-164). By framing RPP's statist economic policies as the root cause of Turkey's economic struggles, DP positioned itself as a party offering solutions to establishment-created problems. This rhetoric resonated with blue-collar workers, the commercial and financial bourgeoisie (including exporters, importers, usurers, and bankers), artisans, craftsmen, small to large landowners, and both urban and rural conservative-Islamist circles (Dokuyan, 2014, p. 165). Initially, RPP supported DP's creation to ease internal tensions and gain international approval. However, recognizing DP's rising popularity and the risk of losing power before the nation was politically prepared, RPP moved the general elections forward by one year—to 1946—

securing another four years in government until 1950 (Dokuyan, 2014, p. 166; Ahmad, 1993, pp. 105-106).

While the peaceful transfer of power in 1950 was a remarkable milestone in Turkish political history—especially given that single-party governments often resist relinquishing control and lean toward authoritarianism (Ahmad, 1993, p. 107)—the rise of DP did not necessarily translate into a fully democratic era for the Republic. Although DP's success brought a more competitive political environment which reflected the pluralistic nature of Turkish society, this was short lived, as DP's governance soon began to exhibit authoritarian tendencies of its own. Rather than fostering an open political landscape, the DP leadership, particularly Adnan Menderes, increasingly sought to suppress any and all opposition, limit press freedoms, and consolidate political power. Thus, while the 1950 election symbolized a democratic breakthrough for Turkey, DP's rule also highlighted the fragile nature of Turkey's democratic institutions, and the persistent struggle between political liberalization and authoritarian impulses stemming from right-wing Islamist conservatism. In Feroz Ahmad's own words:

"They [the Democrats] saw themselves as the representatives of the 'national will' (milli irade) to which they alone held themselves accountable. If they alienated the people then the people would let them know at the next election just as they had so convincingly informed the opposition. Though the Democrats professed to believe in democracy, their understanding of it was rather crude. They failed to shed the anti-democratic mentality of the mono-party period which brooked no opposition from any quarter, including from within the party itself." (Ahmad, 1993, p. 110)

And furthermore:

"The positive contribution of the DP to the development of democratic practice in Turkey was virtually nil; however, their negative contribution was considerable. During the ten years of DP rule, the intelligentsia which had for the most part supported the Democrats came to realise that multi-

party politics, let alone democracy, could not function with institutions inherited from the early republic.” (Ahmad, 1993, p. 110)

While DP framed many of its anti-secular and anti-establishment policies as “democratic emancipations”, their broader implications suggested a gradual erosion of the rigid secularism established during the early years of the republic. Menderes’ rhetoric skillfully leveraged the notion of popular legitimacy to justify policies that challenged the status quo. However, this approach increasingly alienated the bureaucracy, the military, and institutions that viewed DP’s governance as a threat to the foundational principles of the republic. Over time, DP’s growing authoritarian tendencies—such as press censorship, political suppression, and institutional marginalization—heightened concerns that the party was undermining democratic governance rather than reinforcing it. The culmination of these tensions resulted in the military coup of May 27, 1960. The intervention, carried out by the pro-secular and pro-establishment Turkish Armed Forces, was justified under the premise that DP’s rule had become detrimental to Turkish democracy. This marked the first military coup in the republic’s history and set a precedent for future military interventions in Turkish politics, reinforcing the military’s role as a guardian of secularism and state stability.

The DP experience marks the foundation of almost all right-wing parties and populist rhetoric in Turkey. Subsequent nationalist and Islamist parties adopted its discourse, refining its portrayal of the republic and its institutions as anti-religious, corrupt, and detached from the people. These parties strategically distorted secularism, framing it as hostile to religion and society. The DP’s struggle against republican principles under the guise of democratization not only led to its own downfall in the 1960 coup, but also hindered the realization of genuine democratization. By enabling coups that destabilized Turkey’s political order, it inflicted lasting damage on Turkish democracy.

3.4. The Justice Party Era (1960-1980)

The 1960 coup, the first in Turkish Republic history, had lasting political consequences. Mid-ranking officers, citing DP’s growing authoritarianism—especially under Menderes in its final four years—intervened (Temizgüney, 2018; Özdemir, 2002, pp. 222-224). Rising political suppression, economic struggles,

inflation since the mid-1950s, and deepening polarization between rural conservatives and urban liberals fueled military paranoia. Committed to Kemalist secularism, the military saw DP's anti-secular rhetoric as a civil war threat. The intervention followed DP's martial law declaration and investigative committee targeting the opposition, amid escalating nationwide protests led by secular university students (Temizgüney, 2018). After the coup, a new constitution was drafted, and the military junta handed over power to civilians following the first election on October 15, 1961 (Hale, 1994). Under İsmet İnönü's leadership, the RPP won the most votes and formed a coalition with smaller right-centrist parties. Although the Justice Party-JP (Adalet Partisi-AP), founded by former DP members, did not win first place, it gained a significant share, positioning itself as a strong opposition and future threat to the RPP (Ahmad, 1993, p. 137). Given the relatively free and fair multi-party election, it seems the military wanted to quickly remove this burden (Temizgüney, 2018).

During its time in government before the 1965 elections, the RPP faced a challenging period and lacked the political power to fix social divisions and economic issues (Hale, 1994). The military coup was seen as illegitimate by a significant portion of the population, fostering the belief that the RPP was closely tied to the military. This association led many within Turkish society to link the execution of Adnan Menderes with the RPP, deepening the divide between the party and conservative-Islamist groups and strengthening the perception that the RPP's political elite were defending "the system" against "the people". During this period, unsurprisingly, the JP's political strength solidified, gaining further support from groups which distrusted the RPP (Temizgüney, 2018). Under Süleyman Demirel's leadership, the JP became a strong opposition to the RPP via showing sensitivity to religious tendencies while maintaining a secular image. Demirel, also capitalized on his background as a politician from a small province, Isparta, which allowed him to portray himself as "one of the ordinary people" and earn widespread public support (Ahmad, 1993, p. 139; Gülmez and Aşık, 2014). This eventually led to the JP forming the government in 1965.

The populist rhetoric of the JP, combined with right-wing ideologies under Demirel's leadership, initially resulted in growing public trust, especially regarding unresolved economic issues after the 1960 coup. However, by the late 1960s, a rift began to emerge as the conservative lower-middle class, still grappling with economic

hardships, started showing signs of opposition to the JP government. This group, particularly through strict Islamist rhetoric, accused Demirel of supporting Western and external capitalist powers (Ahmad, 1993, p. 143). In response to these accusations, Demirel's response was as follows:

"In our country, there are a million and a half tradesmen and artisans; that means about five or six million people. Self-sufficient, experienced, knowledgeable, and skilled people are a force in the democratic order. Today's small tradesman may be tomorrow's factory owner." (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 143-144)

This division within Turkish right-wing politics led to the emergence of Necmettin Erbakan's influential right-wing Islamist National Order Party (NOP), which embraced the "*Milli Görüş*" ideology and opposed the JP in 1970 (Çaha and Baykal, 2017, pp. 790-791; Akkır, 2020, pp. 120-122). Simultaneously, the rise of the Nationalist Movement Party (NMP) under Alparslan Türkeş (Ahmad, 1993, p. 144) introduced another prominent right-wing party with ultra-nationalist populist rhetoric. This development in Turkish right-wing politics contributed significantly to the political instability of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ahmad, 1993 p. 144), and despite the JP's success in the 1969 general election, this second term was cut short by the 1971 military intervention by a memorandum.

Unlike the 1960 coup, the military did not directly take control of the government in 1971. Demirel was forced to resign as Prime Minister and dissolve the JP government due to the fear of military repercussions (Ertem, 2018). Nihat Erim, a former RPP member, was appointed as Prime Minister, and martial law was declared in certain regions. The military also targeted the liberal provisions introduced by the 1961 Constitution, deeming them responsible for escalating right-left conflicts in the country. As a result, the state's authority over political and social life was reinforced, and the military's influence over civilian administrations was further institutionalized, especially through institutions like the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu).

As a result of the 1973 elections, the RPP, led by Bülent Ecevit, emerged as the leading party but lacked the majority to form a government on its own. The JP, still under Demirel, finished second and openly rejected forming a coalition with the RPP, believing any government formed under such poor economic conditions would fail (Ahmad, 1993, p. 160). Consequently, the RPP reached an unprecedented agreement with the NSP (National Salvation Party), the successor of the National Order Party (NOP), an Islamist party following the "Millî Görüş" ideology. This coalition, which brought together pro-secular and pro-Islamist ideas, marked a first in Turkish political history (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 160-162). Despite the challenges, the coalition successfully addressed significant issues, including the Cyprus crisis, where it conducted the "Cyprus Peace Operation" with bipartisan support (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 164-165). Although initially successful in boosting political support for both parties, the coalition ultimately collapsed in 1974 due to ongoing disputes over domestic and economic policies. Ecevit's pro-secular and pro-establishment stances and Erbakan's push for Islamic-oriented reforms significantly contributed to this coalition's downfall, marking a turning point that would eventually result in increasing political instability and economic hardships throughout the remainder of the 1970s. During this period, a right-wing coalition led by the JP under Demirel, along with other right-wing populist and Islamist parties, rose to power but ultimately fell due to their inability to resolve the aforementioned issues (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 165-169). This political instability eventually led to the 1980 military coup, which significantly undermined Turkey's democratization process. As Feroz Ahmad (1993, p. 170) argued, Turkey in the late 1970s was more polarized than ever, and the constant political instability caused by coalition governments made the military's intervention unsurprising as a result.

3.5. The 1980 Military Coup and the Reshaping of Turkish Politics

On September 12, 1980, the military intervened in civilian governance for the third time in history with a coup. In order to legitimize the coup, the Chief of Staff Kenan Evren addressed the public as follows:

"Dear citizens, it is because of all these reasons [...] that the Turkish Armed Forces were forced to take over the state administration with the aim of safeguarding the unity of the country and the nation and the rights

*and freedoms of the people, ensuring the security of life and property and the happiness and prosperity of the people, ensuring the prevalence of law and order—in other words, restoring the state authority in an impartial manner.”*⁵

After the military took control of the government—while a large portion of the society saw the implementation of martial law and the decisions taken by the military as promising—many disruptive events soon followed, such as the suspension of the constitution, the dissolution of the parliament, the closure of political parties, and the subsequent arrests of many political leaders and figures (Ahmad, 1993, p. 182). These events revealed how harmful such coups were, and still are, to democracy itself. As a result of these events, the highly centralized and civil rights-restricting 1982 Constitution was drafted and implemented by the military. Additionally, the military’s influence and power over politics were increased, and large-scale human rights violations occurred under the guise of preventing political polarization and violence (Hale, 1994). These violations and pressures by the military took forms such as torture, forced disappearances, and executions.

While the neoliberal economic policies imposed by the military, including privatization, played a role in improving the economy in later years, the regime remained a repressive military dictatorship (Hale, 1994; Karabelias, 1999, p. 133). Instead of alleviating polarization, the military’s repressive and violent actions—particularly against leftists—only deepened political divisions. While right-wing and Islamist political movements were also targeted during the military regime, the military’s staunch anti-communist stance led to a more lenient approach towards moderate Islamist movements, viewing them as strong counter-movements to leftist-Marxist ideologies (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 184-185; Ahmad, 1993, p. 219-220). This military regime directly governed Turkey for three years until the 1983 general elections. However, despite the transition to civilian rule under Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party (MP), the military’s influence remained intact (Öniş, 2004, p. 113). During this period, the societal and political divide between secular and conservative-Islamist groups widened, and the military’s claim to prevent political division was not

⁵ Source: Official broadcast addressed to the nation by the Chief of the General Staff, General Kenan Evren in September 12, 1980.

realized. By the end of this process, political Islam and far-right nationalism were given a platform—in which populism benefitted the most—, with this coup playing a significant role in shaping Turkey’s political landscape in the years that followed (Ahmad, 1993, p. 220).

Following the 1983 elections and the return to civilian rule, Turgut Özal's Motherland Party (MP) created an era marked by neo-liberal economic policies and a focus on foreign trade to adapt to the globalizing world. Under MP's governance, right-wing politics continued to be shaped by conservative Islamist and nationalist sentiments and influence. While Özal's policies contributed to Turkey's economic development, domestic and regional inequalities persisted. Özal remained in power until his death in 1993, and due to the instability of subsequent coalition governments, his rule is often seen as the last relatively stable period of the 20th century in Turkey (Karabelias, 1999, p. 141; Öniş, 2004, p. 117). This period was also significant for the emergence of many contemporary right-wing political movements and parties, which played a pivotal role in shaping right-oriented populist rhetoric and ideologies that continues to dominate Turkish politics today (Ahmad, 1993, p. 219).

3.6. Historical Right-Wing Parties Shaping Contemporary Turkish Politics

In accordance with the reasons discussed above, this section will briefly analyze several influential right-wing parties that existed during the later parts of the 20th century.

Motherland Party-MP (*Anavatan Partisi-ANAP*)

Despite beginning to significantly lose its influence and political power following Turgut Özal’s death, the Motherland Party managed to maintain its political relevance until the late 2000s. Positioned as a neo-liberal, democratic, and center-right party (Yalınzoğlu, 2017, p. 69), the MP’s ability to attract votes from conservative and rural circles came from its moderate and positive populist rhetoric toward Islam, without openly violating the principle of secularism. Additionally, MP politicians frequently adopted a rigid nationalist tone, particularly regarding neo-liberal economic policies, and by doing so they aimed to appeal to the public’s national sentiments and

integrating this theme into their rhetoric (Zürcher, 2013, p. 407). While the MP successfully positioned itself as an “*umbrella party*” capable of garnering votes from different segments of the society (Yücel, 2006, p. 57), it began losing its voter base to other parties similarly positioned in the center or center-right, especially after the 1999 general election.

True Path Party-TPP (*Doğru Yol Partisi-DYP*)

The TPP, just like the MP, positioned itself as a center-right party and followed a policy that could be considered a continuation of the JP, led by high-profile politicians such as Süleyman Demirel and Tansu Çiller. TPP, similarly to MP also positioned itself as a conservative, nationalist, and pro-democratic (Çavuşoğlu, 2010, pp. 22-23). One of the main differences between the TPP and the MP is that: the TPP did not make a special effort to be seen as more moderate by conservative circles, and instead aimed to position itself as a fully center-right party. In addition, TPP’s anti-militarist and pro-welfare state stances also set it apart from the MP’s more tolerant approach toward military and pro-centralist stance (Çavuşoğlu, 2010, p. 23). Despite playing an active role in politics as part of coalition governments in the 1990s, the TPP experienced a decline similar to the MP, especially toward the end of the decade. It continued to exist in Turkish politics until 2007, when it changed its name and transformed into the DP.

National Movement Party-NMP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP*)

The Nationalist Movement Party (NMP) has held a significant place in Turkish right-wing politics since its establishment in 1969. Positioned as an ultra-nationalist party, it has consistently centered its rhetoric around nationalist sentiments (Kalemli, 2022, pp. 129-130). Prior to the 1980 coup, the NMP’s strong emphasis on nationalism and anti-communism played a key role in the ideological polarization that led to widespread violence and clashes between the right and left (Landau, 1982, p. 589; Karakurt, 2016, p. 43). After the military intervention, the party was temporarily dissolved, but it resurfaced in 1983 following the release of its founder, Alparslan Türkeş, from prison. The 1990s marked a period of political resurgence for the NMP, largely in response to the escalating violence by the PKK, which intensified nationalist

sentiments across the country, contributing to the rise of right-wing populism's appeal. After Türkeş's death in 1997, Devlet Bahçeli took over leadership and began a process of modernization that helped move the party away from its paramilitary associations. This shift allowed the NMP to significantly increase its support, culminating in its best-ever electoral performance—17.98% of the vote—in the 1999 elections (Jefferson West, 2005, p. 511; Karakurt, 2016, p. 43). This result also marked the party's rise as the second-largest political force in Turkey, leading to a coalition government with the Democratic Left Party (DLP) under Bülent Ecevit and the Motherland Party (MP) under Mesut Yılmaz. However, the NMP's success was short-lived, as the party was unable to maintain its support in the 2002 elections, falling below the electoral threshold, mainly due to the coalition's handling of the economic crisis of 2001 (Jefferson West, 2005, p. 516). Despite this setback, the NMP has managed to retain a significant role in Turkish politics, unlike other center-right parties such as the MP and True Path Party (TPP). Today, the NMP continues to be a powerful radical right-wing force, with considerable influence in shaping the national discourse on security, identity, and Turkey's future political direction.

To summarize, it can be said that the National Movement Party, throughout its political existence has effectively combined its nationalist rhetoric with populist strategies, where we observe how the NMP emphasizes that the true Turkish identity is under threat from not only external forces, but also internal enemies as well. These forces may be foreign powers, ethnic minorities, or political elites depending on the political context. By invoking a sense of national crisis and portraying the Turkish people as victims of neglect, the NMP also taps into widespread anti-establishment sentiments. This rhetoric paints the elites—particularly secular intellectuals, politicians, and Western-influenced elites—as disconnected from the people's needs and values. At the same time, the party appeals to ethnic Turkish identity as a unifying force, positioning itself as the sole protector of national unity. The NMP often framed itself as the political voice of "the common" Turkish citizen throughout its existence; by advocating for a strong and sovereign Turkey which outright rejects external influences and maintains its traditional values. Through these populist appeals, the NMP has built a support base among voters who feel alienated from the mainstream political establishment, by often presenting itself as the only true representative of the people's interests, especially in times of national crises. This combination of

nationalist and populist rhetoric has allowed the party to resonate deeply with large sections of the Turkish electorate, securing its place as a major political force in the country and Turkish society, both in the past, and in contemporary politics as an ultra-nationalist, right-wing political party and movement with continued right-nationalist doctrinal guidance.

Welfare Party-WP (Refah Partisi-RP)

The WP can arguably be considered the most significant right-wing party in the period between the 1980 coup and the end of the 20th century. Officially founded in 1983, its roots can be traced back to the NSP (*Millî Selamet Partisi*) and NOP (*Millî Nizam Partisi*), making it one of the oldest and influential entity especially in Turkish right-wing politics (Narlı, 1999, p. 38). Under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan, the WP ideologically positioned itself as a pro-Islamic right-wing party in Turkish politics, heavily focused on the "*Millî Görüş*" ideology. The WP advocated for "*Adil Düzen*" (Just Order) as an alternative to the established neo-liberal policies (Tuğrul, 2017, p. 618); instead advocating for wealth equality, support for small businesses over large capitalist corporations, and transforming Turkey into a self-sufficient nation, free from reliance on Western financial institutions (Narlı, 1999, pp. 39-40). Its rhetoric emphasized the significance of Islamic values, asserting that Islam should play a more active and important role in both political and daily life. By promoting these principles, the WP also strongly opposed Turkey's alignment with Western institutions and organizations, such as the European Union, instead promoting stronger—political and economic—ties with predominantly Islamic regions and countries (Tuğrul, 2017, pp. 624-626). In 1997, the military issued a memorandum that led to the fall of the REFAHYOL coalition government under Erbakan's leadership (Narlı, 1999, pp. 42-43). Following this, Erbakan resigned from his position as Prime Minister and on January 16, 1998, the WP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court. WP's influence, despite its closure—and particularly "*Millî Görüş*" ideology itself—, continued to play a crucial role in Turkish politics into the 21st century. After WP's closure, most of its members joined the newly established Virtue Party-VP (*Fazilet Partisi-FP*). However, when VP was also shut down soon after, a significant division emerged between "reformists" (led by Abdullah Gül and later by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and "traditionalists" which identified themselves as the followers of the "*Millî Görüş*"

movement (Narlı, 1999, p. 43-44). The reformist faction founded the Justice and Development Party-JDP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP*), while the traditionalists established the Felicity Party-FP (*Saadet Partisi-SP*), marking the beginning of a new era in Turkish politics.

Understanding what “*Milli Görüş*” actually means, which is the political ideology designed and promoted by Necmettin Erbakan, is incredibly essential to make better sense of the Turkish right-wing politics in the 21st century. This view initially emerged as a response against the perceived moral, cultural, and economic shortcomings of the secular republican establishment and the influence of *Milli Görüş* began to increase during 1960s. As I have mentioned earlier, this ideology played a significant role during both NOP and NSP eras, however, it gained crucial momentum during the WP era in the 1990s. To better understand this ideology which is deeply rooted in Islamic values and rhetoric, it will be more practical to analyze it under specific themes. Talip Tuğrul (2017) listed these themes as follows in his article: Islamism, Islamic unity, Ummahism, Sufism, membership of Ahl al-Sunnah, standing beyond religious sects, nationalism, nativity, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism. Although these are quite complicated themes to fully grasp without sufficient research beforehand; *Islamism, Islamic unity, Ummahism, membership of the Ahl al-Sunnah, Sufism, and standing beyond religious sects* can be defined as interconnected and complementary themes. Broadly speaking, these principles of “*Milli Görüş*” heavily emphasize the importance of core Islamic values, advocating that societal order and stability can only be achieved when Muslims—regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious sect—, establish good, sincere, and righteous relationships with one another (Tuğrul, 2017, pp. 621-631). Additionally, these principles also claim that moral integrity is a prerequisite for economic development and progress within the nation and society.

From these, we understand that *Milli Görüş* heavily contradicts with secularism as a principle, since it advocates for increased Islamic presence in state institutions and implementations. Furthermore, the concepts of “*nationalism*” and “*nativity*” are also synthesized with Islam within *Milli Görüş* as the term “*nation*” means “*followers of Islam*” rather than a specific ethnic group or race of people native to the land (Tuğrul, 2017, p. 633). Similarly, anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism concepts are also in line with Islamic rhetoric, as *Milli Görüş* defines the world as “*designed and controlled by*

the imperialist Western nations” which favors and serves the Zionist agenda (Tuğrul, 2017, pp. 635-638). As it is evident, Erbakan’s ideology reflected his personal world-view and subsequently *Milli Görüş* became staunchly anti-establishment in its nature. Although secularism is not inherently anti-religious, according to *Milli Görüş* view, denying Islam to influence nation’s politics and public life is just as bad as directly serving for *Western imperialist* powers at the expense of *common people*. Necmettin Erbakan was very outspoken about his criticisms on secularism in Turkey, especially when in contrast with European secularism:

*“The mindsets that portray actions contrary to secularism as secularism have failed. These mindsets are those of the People’s Party. We will implement secularism as it is practiced in Western countries and will not create chaos in the country. We will respect true democracy. There will be no hostility toward religion in the name of secularism. Interfering with the people’s faith or their headscarves is a wrong and reactionary attitude.”*⁶

Additionally, he further criticized the system's elites for appearing pro-Western while failing to implement the rights and freedoms present in the West within Turkey and excluding them from the constitutional protection:

*“We do not find certain threats placed on human rights and freedoms acceptable. Whatever the limit of freedoms is in Western countries, we believe that at least these should be present in our country as well [...] The fact that some of the human rights recognized in the West are not granted to certain institutions contradicts our views [...] The rights that exist in Western countries are not present in this constitution. We see benefit in changing the constitution from top to bottom regarding fundamental rights and freedoms. We say that whatever rights are available in Western countries should also be available in our country.”*⁷

While *Milli Görüş* openly contradicts the pro-secular nature of the Turkish Republic, the example of the RPP-NSP coalition government in 1974 suggests that under very

⁶ Source: Milliyet Gazetesi, 19.02.1997, 17.

⁷ Source: Haftaya Bakış Dergisi, 28.12.1986, 12.

specific conditions, both the secular nature of the state and the Islamic leanings of *Milli Görüş* can co-exist, supporting Mudde's argument that right-wing populism's adaptability and flexibility in a democratic environment, albeit in a fragile state. Although this situation is unique, it can also be interpreted as a great test for the Turkish democracy and republican establishment in terms of creating an equilibrium between the state and the nation.

3.7. Historical Trends in Turkish Right-Wing Populism

Following the 1950s, nationalism became a dominant force in right-wing politics, particularly with the rise of "Turkism" in reaction to Turkey's geopolitical concerns—tension between the Western and Soviet blocs—, and minority issues—predominantly the ethnic-Kurdish portion of the society—. The Nationalist Movement Party was a key proponent of this ideology, emphasizing ethnic Turkish identity and national sovereignty. However, simultaneously, conservative Islam also began to assert itself in staunch opposition to the secularism of the Republican People's Party and the Kemalist reforms, as an anti-establishment and pro-Islamist force. This period saw the emergence of Islamic political movements like *Milli Görüş*, led by prominent political figures such as Necmettin Erbakan, who sought to integrate Islam more prominently into Turkey's political—as well as its social—landscape. The combination of these ideologies—nationalist sentiments and Islamic conservatism—, laid the foundation for right-wing populist rhetoric in the following decades, with such movements framing themselves as the defenders of national identity against secular elites, Western influence, and minority groups. This set the stage for the rise of parties like the Justice and Development Party in the early 2000s, and New Welfare Party and Victory Party in late 2010s and early 2020s respectively, which blended their Islamist—in the case of the NWP—and nationalist—in the case of the VP—ideologies with a populist rhetoric, which resonated with large swaths of the Turkish electorate.

CHAPTER 4: DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS OF POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY TURKISH POLITICS

The main research question of this thesis is that what are the differences and similarities between different manifestations of populism in Turkish right-wing in contemporary politics. My hypothesis is that, due to the historical background of Turkish politics and the recent surge of right-wing movements, contemporary Turkish right-wing parties and political entities require in-depth analysis to identify their distinct key characteristics and rhetoric in order to properly establish distinct classifications and categorizations. To answer this research question and test my hypothesis' validity, I have chosen to examine Justice and Development Party-JDP, New Welfare Party-NWP, and Victory Party-VP; in terms of their party programs, election manifestos, rhetoric and political discourses, and ideological orientations. I believe, by conducting a comparative analysis of these parties can provide us with useful insight on how populism came to dominate Turkish society and its governance in 21st century, and it is the aim of this research. Furthermore, I also believe understanding the similarities and differences between different manifestations of populism could give us important hints about the trajectory of Turkey's democracy. Considering the definition of populism I have discussed in the previous chapters, and the historical background of the Turkish right, I argue that it would not be an overstatement to say that a significant part of society—despite their ideological differences—is influenced by populist discourse characterized by fundamentally similar rhetoric. As Cas Mudde (2017) defined populism as a thin-centered ideology which considers society to be divided into two clashing sides: *the pure people* versus *the corrupt elite* of the establishment, I will continue to use his explanation going forward. In order to point out how these aforementioned parties shape their rhetoric for political gains, we must define who is *the people* and who is *the corrupt elite* according to them, individually. For this reason, I will analyze them one by one while also comparing the similarities and differences among their definitions on “*us versus them*” discourses. Although NWP's and VP's definitions are pretty much straightforward—at least at the first glance—, The JDP's long tenure in government necessitates a more comprehensive examination of the party due to changing political, social, and economic contexts. Therefore, I believe it would be more appropriate to analyze the JDP in two distinct periods: 2002–2013 and beyond. During these two

phases, there is a notable difference in the JDP's populist discourse, particularly in the "*us versus them*" narrative. While the JDP's characteristics always revolved around a strong and charismatic leadership style, more Islamic-conservative narrative has emerged in the second half in JDP's governance, unlike during 2002-2013 period. In my opinion, understanding this difference is crucial for better interpreting contemporary right-wing politics in Turkey.

According to Cas Mudde's (2004, 2017) definition of populism and to the trends in right-wing politics, there can be unlimited number of classifications due to how flexible populism is. However, in this thesis, I will use the following specific classifications, for each political party that will be examined and discussed. Although these are widely used when discussing forms of populism regularly, I personally decided to merge certain elements of characteristics in order to create a personal classification, which I can use to determine individual political parties and leaders and categorize their manifestation of populism according to Mudde's definition of populism which were discussed in the second chapter of this thesis in depth.

Charismatic Populism is a form of populist leadership utilized by aforementioned political leaders such as Turgut Özal, Süleyman Demirel, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and even Donald Trump. This type of populism heavily relies on personal appeal, rhetorical skills, and perceived emotional bond between the voters and the elected, rather than the political or institutional organizations or structures, or even a strictly defined ideology. In this type of populism, the leader is the key element in all political discourses, where anti-elitism and emotional appeal to the people is most apparent. Political support and power come from the perceived threats, created or imagined by the cult-of-personality of the leader. The Justice and Development Party under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership falls under this categorization, especially after 2013 and onward.

Religious Populism is a form of populism that revolves around a distinct religious identity, its values, beliefs, and discourses depending on the region and context. Although usually the leader of a religious-populist party is also charismatic in general, this populist manifestation heavily relies on a defined religious ideology which renders the leader somewhat less important in the bigger picture. In this type of manifestation,

us versus them narrative strictly adheres to “pure believers” and “corrupted others”, which can range from people of different religions to secular state organizations or elites. The party and its leader often portray themselves and their ideals as “just” and “true” against oppression via religious symbolism and rhetoric to garner legitimization in the eyes of the common people. While it can exist in a democratic political sphere, it is susceptible to illiberal tendencies depending on how rigid its chosen ideology. While Necmettin Erbakan, and his *Milli Görüş* ideology is a great example in Turkish political history, the NWP under Fatih Erbakan falls under this categorization as his successor in contemporary Turkish politics.

Confrontational-Nationalist Populism is a form of populism which combines nationalist sentiments, rhetoric, and ideologies while being antagonistic and highly combative in its nature. There is a clear definition of “*pure*” people, against “*enemies*” often on ethnic lines. Being neutral at best, or even outright hostile toward the perceived “others”, this type of manifestation of populism is also very rigid and defined by a chosen doctrine or ideology. Although it may co-exist and even benefit from both domestic and international democratic institutions and organizations, it is also susceptible to illiberal or outright authoritarian tendencies due to its hostile rhetoric, discourse, and worldviews. While it strengthens national identity due to its nature, these types of political entities usually reinforce political and social polarization and harm the democratic process in any given context. The VP under Ümit Özdağ in contemporary Turkish politics falls under this category, like Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary.

Although the populist manifestation of any given political party or leader can change and reshape depending on the context and changing political climate, According to Mudde (2004, 2017) it often takes significant time to do so, thus they can be examined and categorized in given timeframes. For this reason, below is the categorization of the distinct manifestations of populism of the chosen three Turkish right-wing political parties, in line with already examined theoretical and historical background, Cas Mudde’s definition of populism, and contemporary Turkish political sphere. Following the table below, there will be more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of aforementioned parties, examining political discourses, rhetoric, party programs, ideologies, and manifestos in order to ratify this table.

Table 1. Contemporary Manifestations of Populism of the JDP, NWP, and VP

Aspect	JDP	NWP	VP
Ideology	Islamic-Conservative	Islamist Revivalist	Nativist Nationalist
Populist Focus	People vs. Elites	Pure Islamists vs. Powers	Turks vs. Refugees
Economic Rhetoric	Development and Growth	Justice and Redistribution	Protectionism
Identity Politics	Muslim Identity	Islamic Morality	Ethnic Nationalism
Leadership Style	Charismatic	Ideological Purity	Confrontational

4.1. *Manifestation of ‘Charismatic’ Populism: Justice and Development Party*

Emergence and the subsequent rise of JDP (Justice and Development Party) is essential for us to understand re-emergence of Islamic-conservatism and populism in contemporary Turkish politics. As the prime example of a center-right umbrella party with Islamic populist rhetoric, JDP managed to hold on to power far longer than any other government in republican history. Because of this central and unique role in contemporary Turkish politics, a greater emphasis and examination of JDP is needed in this section to sufficiently answer the research question and test the hypothesis.

Considering that the founders of the JDP broke away from the Virtue Party to establish this political party, it would be a mistake to deny that the party's roots stem from the *Milli Görüş* movement. Although the founders were "reformists" who parted ways with the "traditionalists," the core elements of the JDP are anti-establishment, anti-secularism, and moderate Islam. This nature of the JDP is best described as “conservative populism” (Ateş, 2017, p. 106). This unique Islam-centric populist rhetoric enabled the JDP to garner significant political support, especially during the first decade of its rule. While there are examples of single-party governments in Turkish history, such as the Motherland Party and Justice Party, JDP is perhaps the

first to pursue neo-liberal economic policies and successfully create a stable, prospering economy (Altıok, 2007; Durmaz, 2016). Under these circumstances, the rise in public support and the consolidation of the JDP voter base is not an anomaly. Although the JDP claimed to have distanced itself from the *Milli Görüş* movement and pursued a centrist approach with neo-liberal policies to align Turkey with the global capitalist system, its rhetoric—emphasizing anti-secularism and prioritizing religious sentiments—indicates that the break was neither complete nor absolute. This strategy led to economic growth, which translated into greater political power and popularity. In addition to its conservative and Islamist base, the JDP attracted many centrist and center-right liberals due to its successful economic policies (Altıok, 2007).

In addition to its success in economic development and the political stability brought by single-party rule, the JDP's emergence as a major political power is largely due to its moderate Islamist populist rhetoric. While openly embracing its identity as a Muslim and conservative political party, the JDP portrayed itself as the "voice of the voiceless" (Ateş, 2017, p. 116), claiming to represent those suppressed for their religious beliefs and values. Despite originating from the right-wing *Milli Görüş* movement and using religious discourse, the JDP—particularly in its early years in power—sought to distance itself from this tradition. It signaled a secular agenda to both the secular bourgeoisie and the military, which saw itself as the guardian of the republic's founding principles (Ateş, 2017, p. 116). The JDP reinforced this stance through its enthusiastic support for European Union membership and the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies, positions that sharply contrasted with the *Milli Görüş* movement's views. These actions helped shape the perception that the JDP would pursue pro-secular and pro-Western policies, safeguarding republican norms and values (Sancak, 2024). Specifically on the subject of EU Membership, JDP had a dedicated section⁸ in its 2002 election manifesto that declared its open eagerness and commitment:

“Our party views our country’s full membership in the European Union as a natural outcome of our modernization process. The implementation of the economic and political provisions of the EU criteria constitutes a

⁸ Source: JDP’s election manifesto for 3 November 2002, General Elections

significant step toward modernizing both our state and society together. Even when considered independently of EU membership, the adoption of these criteria is inevitable. Only by being aware of and engaging with the current era can we deliver our messages to humanity and sustain our presence in the international arena by utilizing the opportunities of the age.”

And furthermore:

“The ideological approaches of those opposing our integration with Europe, particularly regarding national sovereignty, national security, national interests, and national and local culture are delaying the implementation of the Copenhagen Criteria.”

The JDP's effort to distance itself from the *Milli Görüş* movement is especially evident in its foreign policy rhetoric. The *Milli Görüş* worldview, which includes the belief in a "world order under the control of Western imperialist nations" (Tuğrul, 2017), is directly challenged by the JDP's claim that "they are slowing down our modernization by using national independence, national security, national interests, and local culture as a pretext." This statement reveals that the JDP's foreign policy vision sharply contradicts the *Milli Görüş* movement's "us versus them" narrative, rejecting the idea of Western states as "the others" (Bölükbaşı, 2012). In the early years of JDP rule, its pro-Western stance and integration of Turkey into the global economy through neo-liberal economic policies helped minimize backlash from secular voters and institutions, such as the military. Additionally, Erdoğan's remarks, including "we will not interfere with lifestyles, will not make the headscarf a central issue, and will not drag Turkey into another February 28 process" (Bölükbaşı, 2012, pp. 180-181), further solidified the JDP's image as a center-right party, aligning more with the DP than with the Virtue Party or Welfare Party, which adhered to the *Milli Görüş* movement.

The JDP's 2002 election manifesto clearly demonstrates the party's pro-Western orientation in both ideology and rhetoric. Under the section titled "Attracting Foreign Investment", the manifesto emphasized the importance of foreign capital from

developed Western countries for Turkey's rapid and stable development. It identified political and economic instability, as well as bureaucratic and judicial restrictions, as major obstacles to these investments. The manifesto called for significant reforms in state institutions to facilitate foreign investment, including adjustments to the duties and authorities within these institutions. By openly committing to neo-liberal and pro-Western economic policies to ensure stable growth, the JDP completely diverged from the economic orientation of the *Milli Görüş* movement. However, the party also stressed that revitalizing domestic production and capital in Turkey was essential to achieving this development. The party expressed this claim in the same manifesto under the section titled "*Revitalization of the Real Sector*" as follows:

“Due to the economic crisis, investments have come to a standstill, hundreds of thousands of tradespeople have closed their businesses, and millions of our citizens, many of whom are skilled workers, have been left unemployed. Although issues related to the real sector affect a wide segment of society, the economic programs implemented have completely neglected the real sector.”

And additionally:

“The most important way to prevent unemployment in Turkey is to increase the production of the real sector. To overcome the problems in the real sector, it is essential to establish an atmosphere of trust and ensure political and economic stability. In this way, predictability in the economy will increase, enabling real sector organizations to make forward-looking decisions more easily.”

The JDP's claims reveal that while the party distanced itself from the *Milli Görüş* movement in terms of foreign policy and the global economic order, it maintained a supportive stance toward local small-business owners and tradespeople. This approach seems aimed at creating a positive perception among conservative and rural segments of society, which dominate these sectors. Rather than advocating for a purely pro-native and pro-traditionalist economic model, aligned with the *Milli Görüş* movement, the JDP sought to establish a balanced economic path to satisfy both external and

domestic actors in Turkey's economy. In addition to these points, the JDP also argued in its election manifesto that domestic production and exports would play a significant role in economic development and stated that only by increasing these could Turkey solidify its position in the global economy:

“The most important component of our party’s economic growth model is exports. It is of great importance for the development of exports to ensure that our industry achieves competitiveness with international efficiency and for Turkey to open up to the world and become a fully integrated country within the global economic system.”

The JDP’s consistent neo-liberal and pro-Western stance has positioned it as a center-right conservative party, rather than a right-wing radical Islamist one. However, this has not prevented the JDP from sharply criticizing its predecessor governments and the pro-secular elites within the state's institutions. A core element of the JDP's populist rhetoric has been the concept of "elites oppressing the pure people." In the early years of its governance, the term "pure people" was broadly inclusive, encompassing conservative middle-class members, traditional rural conservatives, religious Islamist circles, urban poor, and pro-Western liberals. The "elites" oppressing them were primarily the urban middle seculars, high-income bourgeoisie, and, implicitly, the military, which positioned itself as the guardian of the republic and secularism. We can also observe this broad concept of "*the people*" in the following paragraph under the heading "*The JDP is Conservative*" in the same manifesto:

“The JDP is conservative, viewing the historical experience and accumulated wisdom of our nation as a solid foundation for our future. Turkish society is a great family united by shared common destiny and bittersweet memories in this geography. The values that constitute the identity of this family will be renewed and sustained in light of contemporary developments.”

Continuing under the same heading, the party has explained the foundation of its conservative identity by linking it to the concept of "*morality*" with the following paragraphs:

“In an era where principled approaches in politics have been replaced by short-term self-interests, “morality” has emerged as the most important value. The widespread prevalence of corruption, bribery, irregularities, and partisanship—factors that undermine the functioning of state and societal life—has led to a loss of institutional credibility in politics and eroded the public’s trust in the political system.”

And concludes with stating:

“By prioritizing quality in politics, the JDP aims to place politics on a moral foundation. In doing so, JDP seeks to eliminate the doubts and skepticism that have been created in society regarding the political institution and democratic methods.”

The JDP, by explicitly declaring that it would pursue a morality-based political approach, aimed to emphasize that it is first and foremost a conservative party—one that values religious principles which also seeks to integrate them into both political and public spheres—which promises fair governance for all segments of society, regardless of their strata. At this point, while the JDP cannot be labeled as explicitly anti-secular or anti-establishment, its moderate Islamist orientation has played a significant role in its later shift toward such orientations.

Emerging as the leading party in the 2002 general elections and forming a government, the JDP positioned itself as a moderate Islamist and conservative umbrella party during its first term (2002–2007) by adhering to its pro-Western, neo-liberal, and broadly inclusive populist rhetoric. However, after winning the 2007 elections, the JDP began to move away from its reformist, pro-democratic, and reconciliatory identity regarding Islam and the secular nature of the state, both domestically and internationally. The party distanced itself from its previous goals, such as joining the European Union, signaling a shift away from its pro-Western orientation (Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018). One of the most significant signs of this transformation was the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, which targeted the military and marked the beginning of the JDP's opposition to the military, long considered the

guarantor of secularism in Turkey. These interventions highlighted the military's inclusion among the "corrupt elites" referenced in the JDP's populist rhetoric and demonstrated the party's shift to an openly anti-secular stance (Bardağcı, 2013). According to Murat Somer (2016), the JDP's second term focused on consolidating power within Turkey rather than appeasing the West, aiming to "capture the state" and transform it from within. The 2002 election manifesto's statement, "JDP opposes any kind of intervention outside the democratic system," reflected concerns about the military's role in safeguarding secularism. By 2007, the JDP's increasingly hostile stance toward the military contributed to its departure from broad populist rhetoric and played a role in the rising polarization within the country (Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018).

A definitive break in the JDP's inclusive "us versus them" populist rhetoric can be identified during the Gezi Protests. The participants in these protests were a highly diverse group, including nationalist leftists, revolutionary socialists, secular-leaning nationalists, Alevis, revolutionary Islamists, artists, academics, journalists, and pro-opposition individuals (Aktay, 2013, pp. 15-16). This broad spectrum of participants suggests that the protests were not solely about protecting nature, but rather a reaction against the increasingly authoritarian actions of the JDP government. In response, the JDP labeled the protesters as "*çapulcular*" (looters) and portrayed the protests as acts of "vandalism, barbarism, and a conspiracy orchestrated by Western states" (Aslan, 2013). As a result, the JDP's definition of the "pure people" narrowed, now including only conservatives, Islamist-religious groups, and traditional nationalists with pro-government sentiments. Pro-Western liberals, pro-secular voters, ethnic minorities like Alevis and Kurds, and urban elites were labeled as supporters of "the corrupt elites." This shift marked the JDP's transformation from a center-right umbrella party to an extreme-right, authoritarian political structure (Bozkurt, 2016).

Between 2002 and 2013, the JDP's populist rhetoric broadly defined the "pure people" as the ordinary, religious, and conservative majority who felt marginalized by Turkey's secular establishment. This group included rural and urban lower and middle classes, as well as reformist liberals and pro-democratic segments of society. The "corrupt elites" were identified as the secular factions within Turkey's bureaucracy and military, who were portrayed as disconnected from the people and dismissive of their cultural and religious values. The secular republican establishment, seen as the

defender of liberal democracy and secularism, was depicted as an authoritarian force that acted in its own interests. While the JDP refrained from directly criticizing the West due to its adherence to neo-liberal policies, it occasionally voiced criticism. In its 2002 election manifesto under the "JDP is Conservative" heading, the JDP presented itself as a synthesis of Islamic and democratic values, claiming to represent a broad cross-section of society. The party also justified its efforts to reduce the military's influence—such as through the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases—by asserting that these actions empowered the "pure people" against the authoritarian structures of the Kemalist establishment (Christofis, 2018, pp. 20-21; Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018). The economic growth and stability during this period were used to legitimize the JDP's authority and consolidate its political power.

Since the Gezi Protests (2013), the JDP has moved away from its democratic and moderate-conservative identity, transforming from a center-right umbrella party into a radical-right, anti-secular, and authoritarian force. The narrowing of the "pure people" concept in its rhetoric is unsurprising, as the JDP has intensified polarization between the "pure people" and "the others" to maintain political power (Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018). This shift in populism shares similarities with Donald Trump's Republican Party, with both parties criticizing the global liberal establishment, political elites, and domestic opposition as threats to their nations. Both also target the media, accusing it of misleading the public. However, while the Republican Party's rhetoric remains critical of the media, the JDP's control over Turkish media reflects a more authoritarian approach to controlling the flow of information. A key distinction between the two parties is their stance on immigration: the JDP's pro-immigration policies, particularly regarding Muslim refugees from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, are shaped by its Islamist rhetoric, marking it as a unique form of populism (Balta, Elçi, and Sert, 2022, p. 15). On the matter of immigration, JDP's stance and rhetoric can be better understood from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's own remarks⁹ in 2022:

"We will not abandon them to the hands of murderers. Just as we have always done, we will continue our benevolence. It doesn't matter whether they are from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran—those who have migrated

⁹ Source: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, MUSIAD Turkey's Power Awards Ceremony, 2022

to our country are part of a history we understand well. We belong to a culture that knows better than anyone the true meaning of being a muhacir (migrant) and ensar (host). Those who do not understand or recognize these concepts are not our concern. We know the migration of our beloved Prophet and the time he was hosted as an ensar. We will continue on this path with the same understanding."

And furthermore:

"We will stand by these [religious] brothers of ours who have fled the war in Syria and sought refuge in our country until the end. They can return to their homeland whenever they wish, but we have never driven them out of this land, and we never will."

İhsan Yılmaz and Galib Bashirov (2018) aptly term this pro-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-secular, and authoritarian form of populism "Erdoganism," which they describe through four dimensions: electoral authoritarianism (as the electoral system), neopatrimonialism (as the economic system), populism (as the political strategy), and Islamism (as the political ideology). Allegations of election fraud, vote manipulation, and the pressures observed in recent elections, coupled with Turkey's ongoing economic crisis, high inflation, and its position as 3rd in wealth inequality (Gini Index, 2022), all support this characterization. Additionally, the repression of opposition groups—excluding conservative-Islamic and nationalist factions labeled as "pure people"—and the dominance of Islamist rhetoric in the JDP's discourse, which contradicts Turkey's secular state structure, further bolster the claims of Yılmaz and Bashirov.

This "Erdoganist" manifestation of populism in Turkey can be summarized as Islamic-Conservative in ideology, with populist rhetoric framing the "pure people" as conservative-traditionalists, nationalists, and status-quo supporters, versus the "corrupted opposition and secular Kemalists". Economically, it embraces pro-neoliberal development, and politically, it centers on a strong "Muslim" identity under the charismatic leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Yılmaz and Bashirov, 2018). The narrowing of the "pure people" group in contemporary politics can largely be

attributed to the JDP's desire to consolidate political authority. Having held power for over two decades, the JDP faces mounting economic challenges and growing dissatisfaction, particularly in the 2020s. As a result, the JDP has expanded its definition of "corrupt elites" beyond pro-secular bureaucrats and military figures to include broader groups, as its dominance over state institutions and policies has solidified (Akçay, 2018). This shift has caused the "pure people" in JDP's rhetoric to become more narrowly defined, reflecting a move toward authoritarian-Islamist ideology to preserve political power and consolidate its base. Despite winning the 2023 general elections, the JDP faced a significant setback in the 2024 local elections, securing just 36.44% of the vote, a sharp decline from 44.06% in 2019 (Laleoğlu, 2024). The rise of the NWP, the contemporary representative of the *Milli Görüş* movement, as the third-largest party in 2024 signals fractures within Turkey's right-wing politics and the emergence of new populist forces.

When compared with previously examined international cases of right-wing parties, it can be said that the rise of JDP's popularity coincides with the global rise of right-wing populism due to fairly similar economic, socio-political, and geopolitical trends. This particular "Charismatic Populism" fits rather easily with the pre-established characteristics, key points, and roots of right-wing populism which could also be applied to different manifestations of populism in other regions.

4.2. Manifestation of 'Islamist' Populism: New Welfare Party

Since its founding on November 23, 2018, the NWP has rapidly grown, especially in the recent local elections. Despite being a relatively new party, its voter base remains firmly rooted in Islamist-conservative circles, consistent with the *Milli Görüş* movement's ideology. While the JDP's core base historically comprised Islamist-conservative far-right individuals, this group seems to have distanced itself from the JDP's populist rhetoric, which is heavily shaped by a charismatic leader. Instead, many have shifted their support to the NWP, which aligns more closely with the core values of the *Milli Görüş* movement. This shift highlights the ideological rift within Turkey's right-wing politics. As noted by Oğuz Demir and Ensar Kıvrak (2024, p. 478), the NWP's Islamist-populist rhetoric, particularly its criticism of JDP policies like trade with Israel, underscores this fracture and the emergence of distinct populist factions.

Mahmut Hamsici's (2024) article highlights that the majority of the NWP's votes in the 2024 local elections came from former JDP supporters. The article attributes this shift to two main factors: the JDP's passive stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict and the economic struggles caused by inflation, which pushed conservative-religious groups to seek a new political alternative. Given these circumstances, it's not surprising that these culturally and traditionally right-leaning segments turned to the NWP, which closely aligns with the *Milli Görüş* movement and their ideological values, rather than the left-wing opposition party. In his article, Hamsici also quotes political scientist Ulaş Tol, stating:

"These voters have long been inclined to break away from the JDP but have been seeking an honorable exit route. With the NWP joining the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı in Turkish) in 2023, the NWP has now become one of the legitimate options for JDP supporters to cast their votes."

And furthermore:

"The first is their belief that JDP politicians have become corrupt; criticisms such as nepotism, prioritizing personal interests, and acting unfairly toward those who are not on their side. The second is the increasing and unresolved economic problems. The third is criticisms of the JDP's stance on the Palestinian issue"

Under the section titled "Turkish and Islamic World" in the NWP's party program¹⁰, some parts the party rhetoric that holds significant influence over religious-Islamist voters are presented as follows:

"Efforts will be made in the international arena to ensure the recognition of Palestine as an independent state."

¹⁰ Source: Yeniden Refah Partisi Programı (yenidenrefahpartisi.org.tr)

“Every effort will be made to revive the D-8 organization, which was founded by Prof. Dr. Necmettin Erbakan, to operate in line with its founding purposes and to achieve its main goals as soon as possible.”

“We will work tirelessly to strengthen economic and cultural ties between the Turkish and Islamic world. Recognizing the potential to turn this into a significant economic, cultural, and political power, we will develop joint policies with them.”

“The 57 Muslim countries around the world possess abundant natural resources with high economic and strategic value. Our foreign policy will focus on ensuring that these Muslim countries, with their significant power, unite under the leadership of our country, work together, and use their collective strength as a tool to eliminate injustice, oppression, exploitation, and occupations in the world.”

In an interview with Habertürk on October 14, 2024, NWP Chairman Fatih Erbakan harshly criticized the JDP government for facilitating anti-Islamic forces by allowing the transport of Azerbaijani oil to Israel via Turkey. He emphasized that anti-Zionism, a core tenet of the *Milli Görüş* movement, serves as a key political tool for the NWP to gain support from conservative-Islamist and radical Islamist circles in Turkey. In the same interview, Erbakan expressed his party's intention to close the Kürecik Radar Base, a NATO facility in Malatya, arguing that Western NATO members like the US and UK contribute to the defense of Zionist Israel through its use. He further stated that, in the Israel-Palestine crisis, Turkey, as a predominantly Muslim country, should prioritize Palestine's interests based on the principle of Islamic unity.

Under the section “NATO” in NWP's party program, we can observe the same anti-Western and anti-imperialist approach, as they state:

“[...] however, events such as the Syrian crisis have shown that NATO has been reluctant to fulfill its responsibilities toward us. Following the dissolution of the USSR, NATO no longer considered communism its primary threat. Instead, it began targeting Muslim countries under the

pretext of combating certain terrorist groups. We firmly oppose the targeting of Muslim countries under such pretexts. If NATO persists in this mistake, we do not see it as feasible for the alliance to sustain its existence in the long term.”

NWP’s open declaration of not viewing NATO as a reliable alliance based on Islamist sentiments is significant. This not only shows NWP favors “religious morality” instead of “political pragmatism”, but it also indicates the difference between JDP-NWP on ideological stances in terms of Turkey’s international political position. NWP also names the US as the prime suspect of the destabilization in Middle-East in the next section of their party program, stating:

“It is undeniable that the policies implemented by the U.S. administration do not serve global peace. Its policies regarding Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Africa are known to have failed to bring stability to these regions. Particularly, its biased decisions concerning Israel are seen as detrimental to peace in the Middle East, leading to highly negative developments. We wish to believe that these adverse stances of the U.S. administration are shaped by the pressure of the current leadership and certain fanatic groups. We think the U.S. administration must abandon these approaches immediately for the sake of global peace.”

From these points, it is clear that the NWP’s populist manifestation sharply contrasts with the current JDP government. According to the section in its party program titled “Turkish and Islamic World,” the NWP advocates for severing, or at least reducing, ties with the West and fostering stronger relations with predominantly Muslim nations. Mehmet Aşıl, a prominent NWP MP, has stated that “Zionist Israel will not stop unless 57 Islamic countries and 2 billion Muslims form a global Jihad mechanism.” This anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist rhetoric is consistent with the *Milli Görüş* movement. As Demir and Kıvrak (2024, p. 477) note, the alignment between the NWP’s populist discourse and the *Milli Görüş* ideology stems from the absence of ideological disagreements within the party on these fundamental principles. Additionally, Aşıl referred to the PKK as a “subcontractor organization” working for the US and Israel at Turkey’s expense. These statements highlight the anti-secular,

anti-establishment sentiments of the NWP, which extend further than the JDP's pragmatic political maneuvering.

The rapid rise of the NWP's populist manifestation can largely be attributed to its Islam-based economic rhetoric. The NWP criticizes the JDP's neo-liberal policies, which it believes integrate Turkey into the global economic system in a way that benefits Western powers while harming Turkey. In contrast, the NWP advocates for an economic system independent of foreign influence, prioritizing agriculture, industry, and exports over import-driven growth and foreign investment. We can observe this Islam-centric economic approach from their party program under the "Our Economic Policy" section, which states:

"As a requirement for establishing the principle of "Morality and Spirituality First" in every aspect of life, our economic understanding will be based on work ethics grounded in the awareness of what is halal and haram, a working life where the rights of others are prioritized, the prevention of all forms of waste, and the elimination of all forms of economic exploitation. In this direction, economic activities will be organized not only with a focus on profit but also with the aim of benefiting humanity."

In this "morality" based economic approach of NWP, we can find further evidence of anti-Western and pro-Islam sentiments under the same paragraph:

"One of our goals is to create a new international currency, with the support of all Islamic countries and developing nations, under the leadership of our country, in order to break free from the domination of the U.S. Dollar, which is printed without backing and used by certain powers to establish global dominance and exploitation. This dollar, in essence, serves as a worthless piece of green paper and is one of the main reasons for the economic crises and dependency faced by our country and all developing nations."

Additionally, the NWP advocates for the development of a self-sufficient, and production-based economic policies, rather than import-dependent strategies of JDP to achieve economic growth and prosperity. This stance is clearly outlined in the party's program, where it precisely emphasizes the importance of creating policies which firstly prioritizes domestic production and reduces reliance on foreign imports to strengthen the national economy:

“Aware that it is not possible to permanently strengthen and stabilize the Turkish Lira solely through monetary or financial policies or tools, the necessary structural reforms will be swiftly implemented to create a strong real economy that can invest with its own resources, produce value-added goods with a skilled workforce without relying on imports, and generate a trade surplus. In this way, the necessary trust will be established for domestic and foreign investors to invest in production with a well-managed Turkish Lira.”

NWP’s Islam-centric approach to economic matters also include the industrial sector. Under the section “Our Industrial Policy” in its party program they state:

“For true development and progress, integrated structures and genuine industrial initiatives will be prioritized over colonial-style industrial activities.”

And furthermore:

“Within the framework of the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, necessary initiatives will be undertaken through collaboration, such as “joint product” development, and “joint manufacturing” between member nations.”

Fatih Erbakan (2022; 2024) has consistently advocated for "local and national" production in agriculture, livestock, and industry, emphasizing morality and justice. He criticizes the JDP’s neo-liberal economic policies, which he sees as fostering dependency on foreign nations and imports. It's important to note that Erbakan's use

of "local" and "national" does not refer to ethnicity but is grounded in Islamic values and Muslim identity (Tuğrul, 2017), as previously discussed in this thesis. Thus, the NWP's populist rhetoric in economic matters is Islam-centered and anti-Western. By linking national development to the welfare of rural farmers and blue-collar workers, the NWP appeals to Islamist-conservative and traditional circles struggling during Turkey's current economic crisis. As Abdullah Esin and Mehmet Yaşar Altundağ (2024) argue, the NWP's focus on these marginalized groups has fueled its rise, as these communities were already seeking a political alternative that aligns with their concerns, and NWP's economic policies resonate with them.

The NWP, rooted in *Milli Görüş*, uses Islam-based rhetoric to critique social issues, particularly under the current JDP government. The party's political discourse emphasizes a "family-first" approach, with a strong anti-LGBTQ+ stance, as seen in its party program. Fatih Erbakan has expressed that LGBTQ+ organizations harm the family structure, vowing to shut them down legally if the NWP comes to power (Erbakan, 2022). Erbakan has also opposed the Istanbul Convention, claiming it is based on a sexual orientation theory led by LGBTQ+ individuals, whom he argues seek to corrupt societies—particularly Muslim societies—by undermining the family structure (Erbakan, 2020). Additionally, the NWP takes radical positions on issues such as vaccine opposition, stray animals, and women's rights, distinguishing itself from more moderate center-right politics. Although not explicitly stated, this anti-LGBTQ+ stance can also be observed in the NWP's party program, specifically in the section titled 'Family,' where they state:

“One of the most important causes of social problems and moral degeneration in any society is the weakening and dissolution of the institution of the family. Therefore, it is of great importance to strengthen our family structure for the future of our country and society. The role of the family is crucial in raising the new generations as healthy, moral, and well-rounded individuals who possess our national and spiritual values, both physiologically and psychologically, and who are beneficial to humanity.”

And furthermore:

“The state is responsible for taking the necessary measures to protect and strengthen the family institution, which is vital for the future of our country and nation, and to prevent any destructive material and moral influences that threaten the family structure.”

From these paragraphs, we observe that according to NWP’s rhetoric a person needs to have “morality” and “spiritual-religious values” in order to become a beneficial member in their society. While these claims are not harmful in their nature, as NWP advocates that the *state*, as a political entity, should take responsibility and propagate these values in the society; anti-secular nature of NWP becomes even more apparent.

The populist manifestation of the NWP—based on the NWP’s party program and speeches from its leading politicians—the elements constituting the “*corrupt elites*” in its populist rhetoric can be stated as: the Western-imperialist states and political actors, Zionist lobbies backed by Israel, and LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations, which heavily undermine societal and traditional moral values; and in addition to those, the JDP politicians who failed before, and continues to fail to take decisive and permanent action against these groups within the country. Although the NWP formed a coalition with the JDP in the 2023 elections, it clearly stated after the elections that it had left the alliance, and thus far continued to openly oppose and criticize the JDP, as it had done before the elections (Baykal, 2024). To summarize NWP’s populist manifestation, it can be said that: the NWP is “*Islamist Revivalist*” in ideology—totally in line with Islamist *Milli Görüş* movement—, “*pure Islamists-traditionalists*” versus “*foreign imperialists and Zionists, LGBTQ+ members and supporters, and corrupted and inactive JDP elites that allow such deviants to harm Turkey’s interests*” in populist rhetoric focus (Demir and Kıvrak, 2024, p. 474), “*justice and morality driven economic redistribution of wealth*” in economic rhetoric, a definite “*Islamic morality*” in identity, and “*ideological purity and commitment*” rather than charismatic leadership style. Although Fatih Erbakan is a prominent political figure in contemporary Turkish politics, the NWP’s strength lies not just in individuals but in the deep-rooted ideological foundation of the *Milli Görüş* movement, an Islam-based ideology with a significant historical background. While the JDP’s political power heavily relies on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s charismatic leadership, the NWP is built as

an Islam-centered mass party with a strong ideological foundation that could endure even without a single figurehead (Demir and Kıvrak, 2024, pp. 474-475). This distinction further highlights the contrast between the two parties' populist manifestations. The NWP's strict Islamist ideology appears to have a stronger and more enduring political appeal compared to the JDP's "cult of personality" approach, especially in light of the recent surge in support for the NWP and the *Milli Görüş* movement.

As religion-lenient populism is not as strong and entrenched in the cases of Europe and the US unlike "charisma" and "leader" based manifestations, NWP's "Islamist Populism" manifestation stands out as a distinct and unique case and classification, not only for Turkey, but for the broader political literature.

4.3. Manifestation of 'Confrontational-Nationalist' Populism: Victory Party

Since the transition to a multi-party system, the NMP has been the primary representative of nationalism in Turkish right-wing politics. However, unlike far-right parties in Europe, Turkish nationalism carries a dual meaning, blending ethnic identity with religion (Salamey, 2017). This duality, where being "Turkish" is seen as incomplete without being "Muslim," stems from the "Nine Lights" ideology of Alparslan Türkeş, which has influenced the NMP in contemporary politics (Karabulut, 2018). While the NMP does not adopt an explicitly anti-immigration stance, partly due to its coalition with the JDP, it also refrains from a pro-immigration position on Syrian and other Muslim refugees. In contrast, the VP has emerged as Turkey's first far-right party with a clear anti-immigration stance rooted in ethnic Turkish nationalism, similar to the rhetoric seen in European far-right parties, such as in Hungary and Poland (Esin and Altundağ, 2024; Efe, 2022), where anti-immigration dominates the discourse.

Founded in August 2021, the VP is a relatively new party in Turkish politics, led by Ümit Özdağ. Özdağ began his political career in the far-right NMP, before being expelled in 2016, and later joining the İYİ Party, only to be expelled again in 2021. Following this, he founded the VP and continued his active political role. What sets the VP's populism apart from other contemporary Turkish parties is its singular focus on blaming Turkey's domestic and international issues on refugees. This narrative

differentiates the VP's approach from that of the JDP and NWP. Although the VP has not yet achieved significant electoral success, its effective use of social media has allowed it to reach a wide audience, particularly among Turkey's younger population (Esin and Altundağ, 2024). According to a 2021 survey, 81.7% of Turkish citizens expressed a desire for refugees and migrants in the country to be sent back to their home countries¹¹. Given that the VP emerged during a period of rising anti-refugee sentiment and frames "them" as "refugees and migrants," it is clear that, while the party may not yet have a dominant position in the political arena, it has managed to exert significant influence among the public, irrespective of their societal status. Along with its anti-refugee stance, the VP also frequently accuses the JDP government, along with its coalition partners, including the NMP, of being "corrupt elites" who pose a national security threat. This accusation is explicitly stated in the VP's party program¹² in page 26 as follows:

“Bribery, corruption, the misuse of public resources for personal purposes, authoritarianism, an obsession with luxury and extravagance, and a wasteful lifestyle have become normalized, with no effort made to prevent them. On the contrary, the President himself has become a national security threat by succumbing to blackmail. The institutional structure of the state has been entirely dismantled, and instead of appointing competent and qualified officials, the state apparatus has been occupied by an unqualified group whose primary characteristic is unquestioningly following orders.”

Following this paragraph, the VP strongly contends that the current governing coalition in Turkey is deliberately undermining the nation's democratic processes, effectively accusing them of being anti-establishment and anti-democratic:

“Since the founding of our Republic, the democratic traditions we have been trying to build for 100 years have been destroyed, and the monstrous system, which has turned into an arbitrary government based on a one-

¹¹ Source: MetroPOLL Araştırma-Türkiye'nin Nabzı (Ağustos 2021)

¹² Source: Zafer Partisi Programı (zaferpartisi.org.tr)

man regime, continues to exist despite all the damages it was originally expected to cause becoming clearly apparent over the past three years.”

The VP's harsh criticisms of the ruling JDP coalition are not limited to statements in their party program. In a televised appearance, party leader Ümit Özdağ (2022) accused the government of betraying the Turkish Republic and its democratic process by allowing "imported voters"—refugees and migrants, predominantly Muslim—to participate in Turkish elections. He further claimed that many of these refugees were radical Islamists or jihadists, which, according to him, undermined core principles of the Republic, particularly secularism. While the VP's pro-secular stance is not anti-Islamic, it sharply contrasts with the religious rhetoric employed by the JDP and NWP. In response to accusations of being anti-Islamic, Özdağ (2024) vehemently denied these claims, labeling them a smear campaign. He highlighted that the VP's first official visit after its founding was to the mausoleum of Hoca Ahmed Yesevî in Turkestan, emphasizing the party's commitment to a clear separation of religion and state for the sake of the Republic and democracy. In the same speech, Özdağ subtly criticized JDP politicians for using Islamic populist rhetoric for political gain, stating, “We are not like those who have been Muslims for just twenty years; we are among those who have been Muslims for over 1,000 years”. In its party program, under the section titled "Turkey's Current Situation", the VP openly accuses the JDP government of collaborating with imperialist-Western states to plunge Muslim countries in the Middle-East into chaos. Furthermore, it criticizes the government for turning a blind eye to the ensuing waves of refugees caused by these conflicts, and even promoting it, thereby endangering Turkey's national unity and identity:

“By abandoning relationships based on goodwill, friendship, and trust with our Muslim neighbors in favor of sectarian approaches, the government has disrupted both these relations and regional stability. The countries, whose uprisings were supported by the current administration, have been plunged into chaos, invaded by foreign armies, and subjected to the plundering of their wealth, cultural heritage, and historical assets. As a result, millions of people have been forced to flee their homelands and seek refuge in other countries.”

And furthermore, the VP's party program also accuses the JDP government of deliberately exploiting this chaos, in order to alter Turkey's demographic structure by intentionally allowing the influx of undocumented refugees at the expense of Turkish economy and societal stability:

"As a result, nearly 8 million people, representing a significant demographic threat to our country, have flowed into Turkey, placing a financial burden of tens of billions of dollars on the Turkish nation. Despite the evident demographic and economic threats, the government has not taken any steps to ensure the return of these protected individuals to their homelands. On the contrary, it has knowingly and willingly done everything in its power to alter the country's demographic structure and still continues to do so."

From these, we observe that the VP shares a similar anti-imperialist rhetoric with the NWP, particularly regarding European and Western nations' imperialist agendas. However, while the NWP frames this discourse from an Islamic "Ummah" perspective, the VP's rhetoric is more focused on ethnic Turkism and the interests of the Turkish nation-state. Despite these differences, their shared anti-Western stance reflects a common viewpoint in their populist manifestations. Additionally, while both parties criticize the JDP government's foreign alignments, the VP's rhetoric is notably more confrontational and accusatory.

Seeing the JDP government's neo-liberal and import-dependent economic policies as the primary cause of Turkey's ongoing economic problems—similarly to the NWP—, the VP presents the following paragraph under the section titled *"Neoliberal Policies are Weakening"* in its party program:

"Developments indicate that the post-COVID-19 global economy will enter a period where the guiding and significant role of nation-states in economic life will take precedence over the "invisible hand" of the market. Even the United States has initiated discussions on increasing the role of the state in the economy through economic planning to sustain its economic competition with China."

From these statements, we clearly observe that the VP's economic policy approach is much more state-centric and centralized when contrasted with the JDP. Additionally, the VP also argues that the neo-liberal policies of the JDP government are insufficient and outdated, and that the policies required for the economic prosperity of Turkish society must be implemented in more local and national areas to be successful. Under the section *"Leap Program: Domestic Value-Added Production"* in VP's party program, we can see how much the VP emphasizes the need to support the Turkish blue-collar working class and domestic production with the following sentences:

"At this point, the key point to highlight is that the Victory Party holds a production-based perspective. The Victory Party is a party of Turkish labor and Turkish entrepreneurship. [...] the Victory Party will protect Turkish workers' workplaces from cheap foreign labor and Turkish capital from the pressure of predatory foreign capital groups. Our party will support the growth of strong and creative capital groups to become major players in global markets. Our party will shift the production process in the economy from low and medium-high product manufacturing to high-tech product production. The "Buy Local Goods" strategy, which has been widely implemented globally since 2008, will be dominant in the economy."

In the rhetoric of the VP, we can once again clearly observe their staunch anti-immigration stance, as they emphasize supporting Turkish workers over cheap foreign—in Turkey's case, the immigrants—labor. Furthermore, we see a strict preference for state-supported domestic production policies over neo-liberal and free-market principles of the JDP government. Although this preference for domestic production over neo-liberal policies resembles the rhetoric of the NWP, as I have mentioned earlier, the NWP's national development discourse is Islam and morality-based, whereas VP's national development rhetoric is centered around ethnic Turkish nationalism.

In another speech, Ümit Özdağ (2022) claimed that more than 5 million immigrants, and countless more undocumented, are residing in Turkey due to JDP's pro-immigration policies. He argued that these immigrants are unwilling to integrate into

Turkish society and are instead imposing their own way of life, which significantly threatens republican ideals and values. Furthermore, Özdağ stated that the existence of these "unruly immigrants" poses a threat to Turkey's demographic status quo, to the detriment of common Turkish citizens. Azmi Karamahmutoğlu (2024), the VP's party spokesman, emphasized that to protect Turkey's way of life in both public and political spheres, the VP would send all immigrants, documented or undocumented, back to their countries. He claimed that the VP is the only political organization capable of achieving this. This heavy emphasis on changing demographics due to immigration (Deniz and Aksu Kargin, 2023, p. 223) and the VP's pro-establishment and pro-secular stance sets it apart from the populist manifestations of the JDP and the NWP as a unique form of rhetoric in Turkish right-wing politics. While the VP's populist rhetoric initially presents "the pure people" as "ethnic Turks," it also reflects an intriguing complexity in its view of the Kurdish population in Turkey. The VP's concept of "the pure people," who are oppressed by the "corrupt JDP elites" through economic and political hardships, includes Kurds who live integrated lives within Turkish society. This is reflected in Ümit Özdağ's (2023) statement, "I believe that Kurds are an inseparable part of the Turkish nation," and the party's deliberate omission of the term "Kurd"—or any other minority—from its party program. This indicates an effort to "Turkify" historically existing minorities to prevent their marginalization or alienation by the party's rhetoric.

Aside from its criticisms of the JDP's immigration policies, the VP also chastises the JDP for neglecting Turkey's rural-agricultural and domestic-industrial sectors in favor of import-dependent economic policies. The VP's party program (pages 86-91) advocates for state investments in these sectors to promote development and prosperity for rural communities and blue-collar workers. According to VP Deputy Chairman Mehmet Alagöz (2024), the JDP is deliberately avoiding meaningful action on the ongoing economic crisis, instead "sweeping the problems under the rug." Alagöz argues that the government fails to provide Turkish farmers and workers—"the people"—with necessary economic relief, while continuing to depend on foreign labor and import-driven policies. He further claims that the JDP has severed ties with its former core voter base—rural citizens and those working in agriculture and industry—becoming "out of touch" with ordinary people and transforming into an authoritarian entity focused solely on preserving its power. The VP's confrontational stance against

the JDP is reflected in the first section of its party program, "Our Vision," which, while targeting refugees, also implicitly accuses the JDP government of facilitating this so-called "invasion."

In light of what I have written and discussed above, we can describe the populist manifestation of the VP as follows: "*Nativist-Nationalist*" in ideology, "*ethnic Turkish citizens*" versus "*immigrants and corrupted JDP elites*" in populist rhetoric focus, "*pro-statist, interventionist, and protectionist*" instead of "*import-dependent neo-liberalism*" in economic rhetoric, with a staunch "*Turkish ultranationalist*" identity, under the confrontational-charismatic leadership of Ümit Özdağ. While populist movements of this kind have been rising in Europe for over two decades—such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary—the VP is the first political entity in Turkish right-wing politics to focus primarily on anti-immigration rhetoric. Although the party and its leaders are highly confrontational toward the 'authoritarian' JDP government and the 'radical Islamist' NWP, its skeptical stance toward the West, particularly in relation to the geopolitical situations in the Middle East, aligns with both the JDP and NWP. However, the VP's radical and distinct perspective on who constitutes "the people" sharply contrasts with both parties ideologically. This distinction becomes even more evident in the VP's unwavering opposition to the JDP government, regardless of context. Given the confrontational nature of the VP and Ümit Özdağ, which is central to the ideology and values they represent, it seems almost impossible for the VP to find any meaningful compromise or reconciliation with the JDP's policies.

The examination process, and the subsequent categorization of the distinct populist manifestations is achieved by analyzing first and second-hand academic sources, speeches given by prominent political actors from these parties, their party manifestos, and party programs, according to pre-established theoretical framework and historical background chapters respectively. With in-depth analysis on the aforementioned sources and methods, this chapter concluded that there are three distinct right-wing populist manifestations utilized by the political parties that has been examined. While these manifestations share many similarities, on issues such as national sovereignty, foreign intervention and influence, and national growth; strict ideological differences and their proposed worldviews on both domestic and international issues, this chapter deemed it necessary to distinctly categorize them by unique names and classification

in order to contribute to the political literature, and fill a term gap; in order to make it easy for future researches and classification of other, distinct manifestations of populism by acting as a building block.

All the parties above which have been thoroughly examined within the internal context and dynamics of Turkish politics, proves that: stating a particular political party is “populist” without further classification or categorization, is insufficient on its own. This thesis hypothesized that this was the case, and by rigid analyses of both domestic and foreign cases, it determined various similarities and differences between the populist discourses that necessitate distinct and defined categorization-classification for contemporary right-wing populist manifestations.



CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the manifestations of right-wing populism in contemporary Turkish politics, focusing on the Justice and Development Party (JDP), the New Welfare Party (NWP), and the Victory Party (VP). While these parties share certain similarities in both domestic and international spheres—particularly in their worldviews and discourses—the differences among them necessitate distinct classifications, as each party maintains a unique ideological stance and often finds itself at odds with the others on multiple levels.

One commonality among these distinct manifestations of populism is their target voter base. Emphasizing sectors such as agriculture and industry, all three parties primarily appeal to rural-conservative circles. However, their rhetoric varies significantly. In contemporary Turkish politics, the JDP frames its discourse around “stability, security, and societal norms”, the NWP emphasizes “religious sentiments, the welfare of the common folk, and social unity”, while the VP focuses on “pro-nativist and anti-immigrant sentiments”. Although they compete for the same demographic, their divergent messaging further fragments the Turkish right-wing political landscape.

Another shared characteristic among these parties is their anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric, yet once again, this takes different forms depending on their ideological outlooks. The JDP’s approach to the West and international politics is “pragmatic and situational”, whereas the NWP views the West as “dangerous and untrustworthy” and advocates for stronger ties between Turkey and the Muslim world in line with “*Milli Görüş*” ideology. In contrast, the VP regards the West with “skepticism”, particularly concerning Middle Eastern politics, and prioritizes a strict “Turkish interests and sovereignty first” approach.

Similar distinctions emerge in their economic rhetoric. The JDP endorses neo-liberal economic policies that rely on imports and foreign investments. The NWP, on the other hand, promotes domestic production as a means to achieve “national growth and development”—with “national” referring not necessarily to Turkish identity but rather

to the broader Muslim community, in accordance with *Milli Görüş* ideology. Meanwhile, the VP supports domestic production and export-oriented economic policies, emphasizing “nativist-nationalist economic welfare”. Thus, despite certain overlapping themes, these parties’ ideological, economic, and political differences significantly shape their positioning within Turkey’s right-wing political landscape.

Through a comparative analysis, this thesis categorizes the three main types of right-wing populism in Turkey: Charismatic Populism (JDP), Islamist Populism (NWP), and Confrontational-Nationalist Populism (VP). While all three parties primarily target rural-conservative voter bases, their rhetoric, leadership styles, and policy preferences create ideological distinctions that require distinct and unique classifications.

Justice and Development Party (JDP) – Charismatic Populism

JDP’s populism is centered around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personal charisma and leadership, making it one of the most adaptable and flexible populist models. The party’s ability to shift narratives and maintain a strong “us versus them” dynamic has enabled its long-term dominance in Turkish politics. Erdoğan’s control over political discourse and public perception minimizes risks associated with political setbacks, reinforcing his party’s appeal. JDP also follows a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, maintaining situational alliances, while its economic policies rely on neo-liberal strategies and foreign investment.

New Welfare Party (NWP) – Islamist Populism

NWP it represents a rigid and ideology-driven manifestation of populism, rooted in *Milli Görüş* and anti-secular, anti-establishment rhetoric. While similar religious parties exist globally, NWP is unique in its ability to integrate Islamic values into its populist discourse while still operating within a democratic system. Its “us versus them” narrative aligns with Cas Mudde’s populist framework, drawing on long-standing anti-Kemalist and pro-Islamist sentiments. NWP’s rise can be partially attributed to the decline of JDP’s charismatic populism, as well as its ability to offer a

structured Islamic worldview as a solution to contemporary socio-economic challenges.

Victory Party (VP) – Confrontational-Nationalist Populism

VP's brand of populism closely resembles traditional European and American right-wing populist movements, emphasizing nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and economic grievances. Unlike JDP and NWP, VP's "us versus them" narrative is explicitly built along ethnic and nationalist lines, portraying both the ruling elite and immigrants as threats to the Turkish state. While it does not adhere to a rigid ideological framework like NWP, it offers direct, populism-driven solutions to perceived socio-political threats. VP's populism is not inherently anti-establishment, but its confrontational stance positions it as a significant force in Turkish nationalist politics, with the potential to become more anti-establishment over time.

The findings of this study highlight the diverse ways in which populism manifests in Turkish right-wing politics. These classifications—Charismatic, Islamist and National-Confrontational Populism—offer a framework for understanding the evolution of right-wing populist movements in Turkey and beyond. As populism continues to shape global politics, future research could explore the extent to which these categories evolve, particularly in response to shifts in leadership, economic crises, and geopolitical developments.

Additionally, this study underscores the symbiotic relationship between right-wing ideologies and populism, reinforcing the need for further investigation into how these movements adapt to changing socio-political landscapes. Political scientists and scholars should continue to analyze how populist strategies develop within different national contexts, offering deeper insight into their long-term implications.

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