

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY DISCOURSE IN AUTHORITARIANISM  
AND POPULISM: THE CASE OF TURKEY AFTER 2018

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AFTER 2018**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY DISCOURSE IN AUTHORITARIANISM AND POPULISM: THE CASE OF TURKEY AFTER 2018**

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This thesis examines the role of technology discourse in mobilizing a populist strategy within the recent rise of authoritarianism by focusing on post-2018 Turkey as a case study following the regime change. Rather than viewing technology as inevitable progress, the research frames it as a discursive field shaped by populist strategies employed by authoritarian leaders to consolidate their power and secure legitimacy. By focusing on the multi-scalar articulation of technology narratives, the thesis aims to understand how technology becomes embedded in state-led populist imaginaries of progress, modernization, development, national sovereignty, national pride and independence. In this regard, The Turkish case presents a significant point of analysis to examine the role of technology discourse within the context of authoritarianism. Over the past two decades, Turkey has undergone a significant transformation under the AKP governments. The thesis claims that the transition to the Presidential Government System in 2018 marked a regime shift while the new regime constituted its political discourse on technology around “National Technology Initiative”, declared in the 11th development plan (2019-2023). This shift is examined in relation to the crumbling hegemony led by the AKP’s urban-based

strategy and the change of its populist discourse during a gradual shift toward authoritarianism. AKP's technology-based strategy reframed 'the nation' through a populist discourse centered on technology as part of the regime design while the multi-scalar interplay of the populist strategy intertwines 'the leader', 'the party', and 'the nation' around the National Technology Initiative to legitimize the new regime and mobilize electoral support.

**Keywords:** Technology, Populism, Authoritarianism, Discourse Analysis, Urban



## ÖZ

### OTORİTERLİK VE POPULİZMDE TEKNOLOJİ SÖYLEMİNİN ROLÜ: 2018 SONRASI TÜRKİYE ÖRNEĞİ

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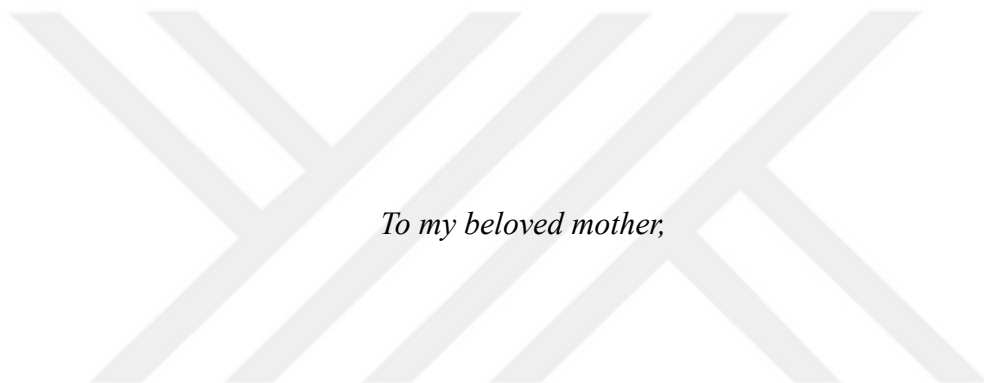
Bu tez, Türkiye'yi örnek bir vaka olarak ele alarak, otoriterliğin son dönemdeki yükselişi bağlamında teknoloji söyleminin rolünü incelemektedir. Tez, teknolojiyi kaçınılmaz teknik bir ilerleme olarak değil, otoriter rejimlerin ve liderlerin iktidarlarını pekiştirmek ve meşruiyet sağlamak için kullandığı, populist bir strateji çerçevesinde şekillenen söylemsel bir alan olarak ele almaktadır. Tez, teknoloji anlatılarının, devlet öncülüğündeki farklı ölçeklerdeki stratejiler üzerinden, kalkınma, modernleşme, ulusal egemenlik, ulusal gurur ve bağımsızlık gibi tahayyüllerle nasıl kurumsallaştığını anlamayı hedeflemektedir. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye örneği otoriterleşme ekseninde teknoloji söyleminin rolünü analiz etmek için özgün bir zemin oluşturmaktadır. Son yirmi yılı aşkın süredir Türkiye, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) yönetimi altında önemli bir dönüşüm geçirmiştir. Tez, Türkiye’de 2018 yılında Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi’ne geçişle birlikte bu dönemin, AKP’nin populist stratejilerinde rejim tasarımı bağlamında bir dönüşüm temsil ettiğini ve özellikle teknolojiye yönelik siyasi ve ideolojik bir vurgunun öne çıktığını iddia etmektedir. Bu süreç, AKP’nin kent temelli stratejisi üzerine kurulan hegemonyasının çözülüşü ve otoriterleşme süreciyle birlikte iktidarın populist



söyleminde yaşanan deęişimle ilişkili biçimde ele alınmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda araştırma, AKP'nin teknoloji söylemini 11. Kalkınma Planı'nda (2019-2023) açıklanan “Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi” üzerinden otoriter yönetimi bağlamında ele almakta ve bunu popülist bir siyasi strateji olarak tartışmaktadır. AKP'nin teknoloji temelli stratejisi, rejim tasarımının bir parçası olarak teknolojiyi merkeze alan popülist bir söylem aracılığıyla ‘millet’i yeniden tanımlamıştır. Popülist stratejinin çok ölçekli etkileşimi ise ‘lider’, ‘parti’ ve ‘millet’i Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi çerçevesinde, yeni rejimi meşrulaştırarak seçmen desteęi sağlamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Teknoloji, Popülizm, Otoriterleşme, Söylem Analizi, Kent





*To my beloved mother,*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Technology has become increasingly significant in many fields in our contemporary era while the technology discourse “is not simply a reflection of the centrality of technology in the operation of modern societies; instead, it plays a constitutive role in their operation and enables precisely that centrality” (Fisher, 2010, p.231). Technology discourse influences how technology is perceived, framed, implemented, and integrated into socio-political structures. The narratives around technological advancements within their historical, social, and political contexts, whether framed as drivers of national development, symbols of progress, or instruments of power, have significant effects in policymaking, economic strategies, social structures, and political legitimacy. Particularly, its essential role is reinforced how political authority engages with technological development in reimagining/reproducing itself. In this regard, the main framework of the thesis will be elaborated in this chapter.

#### **1.1. Aim of the Study**

Political machinery of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has sustained its power for over two decades through evolving political economic strategies. This machinery relies both on the discursive constructions and the continuation of neoliberal economic policies, which operate dialectically and mutually reinforce each other. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP has strategically crafted and deployed their political narratives to maintain and consolidate its power by securing electoral support. Diverse political narratives have been prominent, particularly at the junctures of the general elections, ranging from the promise of democratization and confronting military tutelage, to establishing the 'New Turkey',



fostering economic growth and development, enhancing national pride, and strengthening national security. These narratives serve to deepen the core of the AKP's populist logic in representing 'the people' and 'the nation' against perceived enemies while its populist rule is further reinforced through addressing the discontent generated by neoliberal policies, particularly by introducing redistributive mechanisms (Aytaç & Öniş, 2014; Akçay, 2018).

In this regard, the construction-led growth model has become the key driver of the economy in sustaining redistributive strategies for AKP's neoliberal populist project. Moreover, construction-led growth, based on commodifying urban space, has been fundamental in establishing AKP's hegemonic power by cultivating consent from wide segments of society with redistributive strategies, maintained by the urban rent through the housing sector, real-estate development, mega-projects and infrastructure investments (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021; Balaban, 2011; Cavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014; Penpecioğlu, 2016; Şengül, 2015; Yeşilbağ, 2016). Particularly, the inclusive discourse of AKP's this urban-based strategy promised development, prosperity, and "national renewal through spiritual and economic salvation which animated a politics of hope and resonated with a broad section of Turkish society" (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, p. 465). In this context, megaprojects and infrastructure investments played a crucial role as well as housing policies, serving as mechanisms in reinforcing the AKP's populist narrative through promoting development, progression, and national resurgence. However, AKP's hegemonic power, with its initial inclusive discourse, was also challenged by environmental movements and social protests such as Gezi Park Protests, which emerged in response to the privatization of public spaces and infrastructure expansion at the expense of environmental and social concerns. These protests have led the AKP to employ coercive measures to suppress opposing voices to its rule.

Parallel to these, the AKP governments and the leadership of Erdoğan gradually shifted towards authoritarianism marked by the struggles within the economy, the power bloc, and declining political support following the structural crisis of post-2013 (Bedirhanoğlu, 2022; Akçay, 2021). The drawbacks in economy had already started after 2008 Global Financial Crisis when the US Federal Reserve (FED)

declared its intention to slow down monetary expansion (Bedirhanoğlu, 2022). This crisis in the global context directed AKP to increasingly rely on the construction sector to sustain economic growth and political benefits. However, the economic crisis in both global and national context had profound effects in the construction sector with rising costs, declining investments, decreasing housing prices and sales. These economic challenges have not only disrupted the growth dynamics in economy but have also fostered the social and political crisis by exacerbating unemployment and deepening economic inequalities with rising prices in food, energy, and housing (Balaban, 2019). In this regard, the AKP's urban-based developmental agenda, driven by the 'construction boom', has become increasingly exhausted to generate social and political cohesion. Redistributive strategies sustained by urban rent have begun to fail in delivering the promises of development and prosperity within the context of the ongoing social, political, economic crisis, revealing the limits of the construction-led growth. On the other hand, the inclusive discourse of the AKP's urban-based strategy, already started to fracture during the Gezi Protests, started to become more limited in terms of "relying on winning the consent of some segments to the use of coercion against the others" (Özen, 2020, p.14).

To solve the multiple crisis, the concentration of power and authoritarian dynamics has been further reinforced by the regime change in 2018. The AKP and MHP coalition won the constitutional referendum to change the regime in Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017. The transition to the new regime was completed when Erdoğan won the 2018 presidential election. In this regard, the Presidential Government System served as an 'authoritarian fix' to enhance the control over the state structure (Akçay, 2021). Ultimately, the centralization of power in the new governance structure, along with the expanded executive powers of the president, became a major episode in the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Turkey under the Presidential Government System.

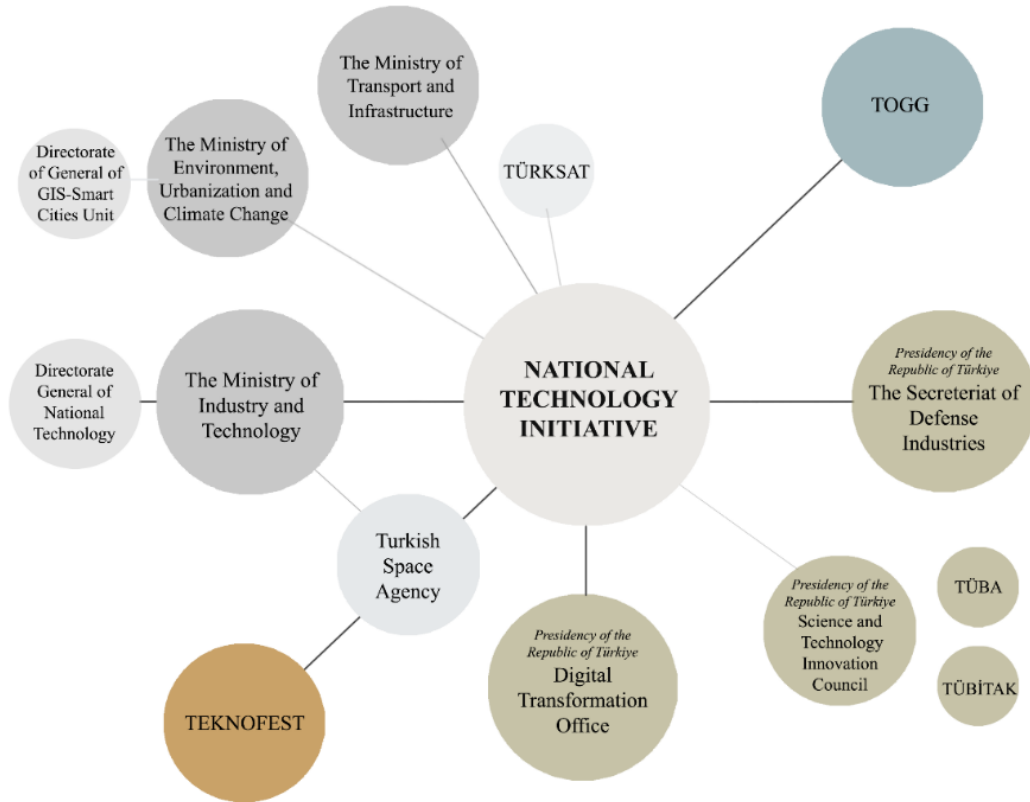
Building on this framework of crumbling hegemony led by the AKP's urban-based strategy and the change of its populist discourse during a gradual shift toward authoritarianism, the thesis claims that the post-2018 period represents a shift/turn

in the AKP's populist strategies as part of the regime design, particularly with a political and ideological emphasis on technology. The thesis argues that the new regime constituted its political discourse on technological advancement by state-led populist imaginary of modernization, development, prosperity, national sovereignty and pride. In this regard, the new regime reframed 'the nation' through a populist discourse centered on technology by relying on state-led strategies through the executive centralization of the Presidential Government System to mobilize public support.

Moreover, the thesis claims that the discourse on technology has been instrumentalized to facilitate the consolidation of authoritarian power and legitimize its rule by blurring the boundaries between the state and the party. While the authoritarian regime grounds its political discourse in technology, the AKP's populist narrative, initially presented as democratic and inclusive, has evolved into a more authoritarian form with a division between the 'people' aligned with the AKP and the rest of the 'people' (Yalvaç&Joseph, 2019). On the other hand, the AKP has not entirely abandoned its primary urban-based strategy, rather the emerging technology-based strategy has become instrumental in reproducing adapting the AKP's populist project, to sustain its hegemonic power within the context of growing social unrest, increasing opposition, and particularly the regime design.

Within this context, the thesis frames the "National Technology Initiative (*Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi*)", declared in the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan (2019-2023), as an authoritarian populist strategy to legitimize the new regime and mobilize electoral support. Although it has been an aspiration for Erdoğan in his 23 years of rule, rooted in Turkey's right-wing political traditions, the National Technology Initiative (NTI) has scaled up the scope of the technological development. In this regard, the NTI expands across various fields, has driven institutional changes, and been actively promoted by key political actors since 2018. The NTI is articulated in numerous statements by President Erdoğan and other key political figures as a 'vision, guide, roadmap, soul, and the very essence' of Turkey's pursuit of becoming a strong and fully independent nation. Within this overarching policy

framework, certain institutions and a variety of fields have gained prominence in the AKP's political strategy, from the defense industry, national car production, and local and national industrial production to space exploration, satellites, artificial intelligence, and smart cities as well as fostering the 'Teknofest Generation' and building 'the scientific corpus' of the NTI (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1.** Key strategic institutions and fields

By drawing on the theoretical framework that frames populism as a political strategy led by authoritarian leaders, the populist strategy of the AKP on technology is situated with the global context through analyzing cases around the world. As the interplay between the authoritarian populist strategies and the emphasis on technological development is not unique to Turkey in the contemporary moment of authoritarian regimes/ leaders in the world. Especially after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the influence of authoritarianism and right-wing populism has risen due to the legitimacy crisis of neoliberalism as well as the 'ideological crisis' in the context of profound socio-economic shifts globally (Akçay, 2021; Jessop, 2016). Authoritarian leaders have capitalized on the general discontent exploiting

fears and grievances of populations while addressing technological development to wealth, prosperity, international prestige, and national revival in the competitive global order within varying degrees in their historical and geographical context, either to entrench their power or to sustain their rule. In this regard, populism is framed in line with the political-strategic approach which emphasizes that the populist strategies identify “the people with the leader and then vest in the leader the power emanating from the people” while rhetorically empowering them (Weyland, 2017, p.54). In addition, populism as a political strategy is discussed as embedded in the broader social, economic, and political dynamics. This allows an examination of how populist strategies navigate these dynamics to either reinforce or challenge existing power structures as well as as well as ‘the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power’ by employing narratives on technology.

Furthermore, these methods and instruments, representing the broader strategies employed by populist autocrats, are analyzed through the lens of scale as an analytical tool. In this regard, the concept of scale is framed as a tool of abstraction to produce knowledge and examine the relationality of each scale within various power structures (Bayırbağ, 2006). By examining the multi-scalar articulation of technology discourse, the thesis highlights how specific strategies are deployed at national, global, and local scales – while emphasizing the constitutive role of each scale for others through ongoing economic, political, and social formation.

Based on this framework, the research explores technology discourse of the AKP in the period starting from the regime change in 2018 by framing it as a populist political strategy, to argue how it contributes to legitimizing the authoritarian rule within the context of the new regime. It also provides an examination of the social impact of the technology-based strategy of the AKP shaped around the National Technology Initiative in securing consent and influencing electoral preferences. The research also explores the technology-based strategy of the AKP in relation to its urban-based strategy, through its strengths and limitations as well as the ways in which opens new and contested areas to commodify urban space, in sustaining the AKP’s hegemonic power to investigate the authenticity of the Turkey case.

Within this context, the thesis aims to contribute to the scholarly work about Turkey's evolving authoritarian political landscape through the lens of populism by analyzing its manifestations in the realm of technology. Furthermore, by situating the Turkish case within broader global dynamics, the thesis aims to bring this discussion into conversation with authoritarianism in the global context, highlighting both the specific and similar patterns of how technology is instrumentalized to legitimize authoritarian rule with populist discourse to secure public support and consent. In this regard, the thesis explores how technology is embedded into state-led populist visions of modernization and development by multi-scalar strategies within which technology narratives are constructed and deployed.

To address such nexus of authoritarianism, populism, and technology, particularly for discussing these dynamics in Turkey post-2018 within the framework of the National Technology Initiative as a key mechanism of the AKP's technology-based strategy, the research design of the thesis will be elaborated in the next section.

## **1.2. Methodology and Research Design**

The research will focus on exploring how technology discourse has been shaped as a populist strategy through rhetorical and narrative structures within the context of an authoritarianism in Turkey. Focusing on the period beginning with the introduction of the Presidential Government System in 2018 and through the 2023 elections, the research investigates how narratives on technology have been employed to legitimize political authority, reinforce nationalistic imaginaries, and address popular sentiments. In addition to examining the discursive construction of technology as a populist strategy within authoritarian context, the research also aims to discuss the public's perception of the populist strategy regarding technology to what extent it aligns or is contested in terms of its societal reflections.

To understand the political and ideological dynamics in shaping technology discourse in Turkey during the post-2018 period, the main methodological premise of the thesis is deploying an interpretivist position, by employing multiple qualitative

research methods as content analysis and critical discourse analysis. This approach is rooted in the premise that social and political phenomena are constructed through discourse, practice, and interpretation. In ontological terms, the interpretivist position is anti-foundationalist while Marsh and Furlong (2010) assert that “for researchers working within this tradition, social phenomena cannot be understood independently of our interpretation of them; rather it is these interpretations/understandings of social phenomena that directly affect outcomes” (p.199). This epistemological stance underlines the importance of analyzing how meanings are produced within specific socio-political contexts. In this regard, the interpretivist/heuristic sphere of the research will be established through combined use of content analysis and critical discourse analysis, even if they stem from different philosophical bases, they can complement each other by providing different perspectives (Hardy et al., 2004). Content analysis will help to categorize specific themes, concepts, and narratives within the data to gain insights into how technology narrative is officially constructed within state structure by political actors. Critical discourse analysis will provide linking the data within the broader context of authoritarianism and populist political projects.

Discourse analysis is used within the framework of various disciplines while every discipline has varying conceptualizations (Hajer, 1993; van Dijk, 1997). In this study, a tradition of discourse analysis from a political economy perspective will be adopted as this approach highlights the role of rhetoric and narrative structures within an ideological context (Hajer, 1993). Lees (2004) asserts that:

Here discourse analysis is a tool for uncovering certain hegemonic ways of thinking and talking about how things should be done that serve certain vested interests...In this context, discourse is almost synonymous with ideology itself in so far as it functions to conceal the power of vested interests and to induce the consent of the dominated to their own domination (p.102).

However, Fairclough (2013) states that “discourse is ideological in so far as it contributes to sustaining particular relations of power and domination” (p.15). In this line of thought, critical discourse analysis focuses on “discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies,

institutions, social identities, and cultural values<sup>1</sup>)” (Fairclough, 2013). In this regard, rhetoric, narrative structures, and language are central to critical discourse analysis as they reveal how power is constructed and legitimized through discursive formations. Discourse should be discussed as ‘a constitutive part of its local and global, social and cultural contexts’ while analysis “moves from macro to micro levels of talk, text, context or society, and vice versa” (van Dijk, 1997). It is especially crucial to point out that how narratives are not ‘free floating’ and linked to historical context, political formations, power relations and institutional and organizational forms (Hajer, 1993) and “have been constructed in and through public narratives” (Jessop, 1997).

Within this framework, this thesis analyzes Turkey as a case study to explore how technology has been deployed as a tool for a populist strategy within an authoritarian context since the regime change within the Presidential Government System in 2018. The Turkish case offers a significant site for analysis, given the state-led promotion of technological advancement around the National Technology Initiative as a symbol of national pride. To situate the research within a broader global context, the research first examines authoritarian populist strategies through world cases by framing their engagement with technology in consolidating power, shaping public discourse, and mobilizing support. These examples serve to highlight both the shared and unique patterns in instrumentalizing technology within their political economic context. By scrutinizing the world cases, an analytical framework is formulated by deploying scale as an analytical tool to examine authoritarian populism’s engagement with technology in the case of Turkey.

To explore the interpretations and meanings associated with technology in the period starting from 2018 in Turkey, the research will involve the systematic collection and analysis of data from a variety of sources, including key policy documents, development plans, and election manifestos (Appendix A). These sources are instrumental in tracing the evolution of technology narrative and the strategic priorities set forth by the political authority. In addition to these formal documents,

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<sup>1</sup> These are in part semiotic, they internalize semiosis without being reducible to it. “Semiosis is viewed here as an element of the social process, which is dialectically related to other.” (Fairclough, 2013, p.14)



the study will also examine public speeches delivered by key political figures. These speeches provide valuable insights into the rhetoric and discourse surrounding technology, reflecting how political authority frames technological advancements within broader socio-political agendas. Moreover, the study will extend its analysis to include news coverage from 2017 to 2024 to capture the interplay between policy, public discourse, and technological development over time. Analyzing news from this timeframe is essential for the thesis “to identify the interpretations and meanings attached to social phenomena” in the public sphere (Marsh and Furlong, 2010). Through this multi-faceted qualitative analysis, the research will aim to construct a contextualized understanding of the technological narrative that have emerged in Turkey around the National Technology Initiative, contributing to the broader discourse on the role of technology in shaping contemporary political strategies.

In addition, to discuss the public's perception of the populist strategy, in-depth interviews will be carried out with a group of key experts and professionals. In this regard, the interviewees were selected based on their professional roles, which involve analyzing the societal impact of political issues. This group includes research company representatives, journalists, an executive from a technology firm and the head of a civil society organization. The semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, focused on assessing the impacts and societal acceptance of the technology narrative. The expert interviews serve to illuminate how technology discourse is received by various segments of society. Through this, the research explores the extent to which technological narrative engages with the public and its limitations as a populist strategy in mobilizing public support. Furthermore, the research will also provide a comparative discussion of AKP's urban-based and technology-based strategies in the light of the expert interviews.

On the other hand, it is important to note that, as a researcher, I did not have the opportunity to gain an insider's perspective due to my position as an outsider to the socio-political structures and networks of political power in Turkey. Consequently, to understand the overall political and discursive environment, I had to construct an understanding of this world. This led me to engage in extensive reading, analysis, and interpretation of public gatherings through media coverage, public speeches of

key political agents, and official documents rather than relying on technical software for content analysis. This approach enabled more meaningful contextualization of the symbolic, rhetorical, and ideological dimensions of themes around technology narrative within the socio-political dynamics.

### **1.3. Organization of the Chapters**

The thesis consists of six chapters, each contributing to an analysis of the intersection between technology, populism, and authoritarianism. Chapter 1 introduces the aim and objectives of the research. It also presents the overall research design with methodological approach as well as the structure of the thesis, summarizing the content of each chapter.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of populism, examining it as a political strategy within the intersection of social, political, and economic dynamics led by authoritarian leaders. In this regard, the first section of Chapter 2 focuses on presenting the dynamics behind the recent rise of authoritarianism and populism globally. These dynamics are discussed within the crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic project to situate the theoretical discussion within a historical context. Following this, an analysis of populism is provided, exploring its definitions from various theoretical perspectives to establish the analytical approach of the thesis about populism while its intertwined relation with social, political, and economic dynamics is explored. Building upon this, the third section of the chapter addresses the authoritarian populist strategies in utilizing technology to consolidate power through discussing world cases. After examining authoritarian populist strategies around the world, the final section of Chapter 2 elaborates on the research themes of the thesis by deploying scale as an analytical tool; (i) developmentalism, (ii) strong leadership, (iii) international reputation, and (iv) dissemination into everyday life. These themes are used to analyze the National Technology Initiative as a populist strategy within the context of authoritarianism.

Chapter 3 is divided into three sections to address the political economic context in Turkey from a historical perspective. This chapter situates the National Technology

Initiative (NTI) within the broader trajectory of AKP's political economic policies, examining how its technology-based populist strategy evolved in response to shifting political and economic dynamics. The first section examines the period preceding the NTI, by presenting the urban-based strategy employed by the AKP to establish its hegemonic power and populist rule. The section helps to situate the emergence of the technology discourse within this political economic framework. The second section analyzes the conditions that led to the development of the NTI within the crisis context. The third section explores the origins and development of the NTI through focusing on its role within the Turkish context under the rule of AKP by analyzing official policy framework and key institutions.

Chapter 4 examines the National Technology Initiative as an authoritarian populist strategy in the light of the themes discussed in Chapter 2; (i) developmentalism, (ii) strong leadership, (iii) international reputation, and (iv) dissemination into everyday life. This chapter seeks to unravel how technology discourse functions as a central element of the AKP's political agenda. By examining the interplay of developmentalism, strong leadership, international reputation, and the dissemination of technological advancements into everyday life, the chapter investigates how the National Technology Initiative serves as a tool for sustaining the AKP's populist strategy and advancing ways to contribute to their hegemonic politics.

Building upon the political economic context presented in Chapter 3 and the analysis of the technology discourse in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 aims to deepen the analysis by discussing whether the technology-based strategy of the AKP shaped around the National Technology Initiative serves to sustain AKP's hegemonic power, which was achieved by the urban-based strategy. In this regard, the chapter discusses the results of in-depth interviews with key experts based on the societal resonance of technology-based strategy as well as urban-based strategy. In this regard, the chapter also provides a comparative discussion of AKP's urban-based and technology-based strategies to understand their limits and strengths in serving the continuity of hegemonic politics in securing consent. By situating the technology discourse within the broader context of AKP's political strategies, Chapter 5 aims to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of the populist strategy around technology.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter of the thesis, which evaluates the key arguments presented throughout the research. It provides an analysis of the intersection among the technology, populism, and authoritarianism, with focusing on the Turkish case post-2018. Finally, the chapter outlines the overall results and key arguments of each chapter, by providing a framework for future research.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter aims to establish a theoretical framework for examining the discourse on technology as a populist strategy within the context of authoritarianism. The chapter aims to discuss the ways in which the narratives on technology are employed not only as tools of modernization and development, but as mechanisms that serve to legitimize power and foster popular support. Through this framework, the chapter provides a foundation for understanding how technology is strategically framed in line with populist imaginaries under authoritarian rule. In this regard, the first section of the chapter discusses the recent rise of authoritarianism within the crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic project, exploring how populism intersects in this process, to situate the analysis of technology discourse within a wider political and ideological framework. The second section provides a discussion of the concept of populism, framing it as a political strategy that emerges at the intersection of social, political, and economic dynamics. The third section focuses on the world cases in utilizing technology as a populist strategy led by authoritarian leaders. Building upon these cases, the final section of the chapter elaborates the research themes of the thesis to analyze the technology discourse as a populist strategy.

#### **2.1. The Rise of Authoritarianism and Populism**

The aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis has fostered widespread disillusionment with existing political systems, contributing to leaders with authoritarian tendencies coming to power or the exacerbation of authoritarian practices among those already in power. For instance, Viktor Orbán in Hungary capitalized on the state crisis to consolidate power and implement illiberal policies, while Vladimir Putin in Russia further intensified his authoritarian grip. Meanwhile,

Narendra Modi, known for his authoritarian populist approach, became the Prime Minister of India in 2014. Donald Trump's election in the United States in 2016 reflected a populist backlash against the political establishment. In this regard, Trump's 2024 re-election in the United States represents another manifestation of the rise of authoritarianism within an established democracy, particularly in the context of the support he receives from the technology elites. As Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) assert that growing evidence suggests a global shift undermining several established democracies, such as the United States, while noting that "substantial autocratization has been recorded over the last 10 years in countries as diverse as Hungary, India, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela" (p.1097).

These developments have sparked a scholarly interest in explaining the underlying dynamics of rising authoritarianism. This scholarly interest also focuses on the shifting practices of authoritarian rule, marked by its adaptability, use of democratic institutions for illiberal practices, and the deployment of populist narratives. On the one hand, mainstream political science frameworks often explain the rise of authoritarianism through an analysis of political regime types, focusing primarily on non-economic factors. These frameworks typically attribute the causes of authoritarianism to the influence of cultural and social dynamics, such as 'the anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric employed by right-wing populists' (Altınörs & Akçay, 2022). This perspective suggests that the appeal of authoritarian leaders is driven more by identity-based aspects rather than economic grievances or class struggles. As a result, such frameworks often underestimate the role of economic crisis, class dynamics, and neoliberal restructuring in shaping the conditions under which authoritarian and populist leaders gain legitimacy and consolidate their power.

On the other hand, critical political economy scholars contextualize the rise of authoritarianism within the broader crisis of neoliberal capitalism, by emphasizing that authoritarian tendencies could not be understood without examining the structural contradictions of it in deepening economic inequality, the erosion of social welfare, and the disempowerment of labor. They argue that the crisis is deeply rooted in the contradictions of capital accumulation regime and the role of state power in terms of its intervention to political-economic sphere. However, the state intervention

alone is not sufficient to ensure the continuous reproduction of capitalist social relations. Instead, a hegemonic project is needed, which involves creating a consensus among different classes through consent and force to establish and sustain the capital accumulation process (Jessop, 1997). In this regard, exercise of state power is significant to make institutional and legal arrangements to facilitate the capital accumulation process. As Jessop (2016) asserts “neoliberalization is a distinctive economic, political, and social project that tends to judge all economic activities in terms of profitability and all social activities in terms of their contribution to differential capital accumulation” while state power has a key role for the reproduction of the neoliberal agenda (p.412). Especially after 2008 Global Financial Crises, “massive state intervention has created conditions for a return to neoliberal ‘business as usual’ in the neoliberal heartlands” (Jessop, 2016, p.413).

In this regard, authoritarian neoliberalism concept has been utilized by some scholars to explain the rise of authoritarianism as Bruff (2014) emphasizes that “one of the most notable aspects of the post-2007 era has been the inability of European social democratic political parties to take advantage of the ongoing crisis, which would on the surface appear tailor-made for a critical view of free-market capitalism to gain support” (p.113). This framework highlights the importance of ‘mobilizing the institutional power’ and the more coercive mechanisms by the growing dominance of central governments around the framework of ‘executive centralization’ in 2010s (Bruff, 2014; Jessop, 2016; Bruff & Tansel, 2019). In addition, authoritarian neoliberalism underscores the importance of examining the intersections between neoliberal economic policies and authoritarian political practices, in arguing the crisis has not led to neoliberalism abandonment but rather to its entrenchment through more authoritarian means. This includes the implementation of austerity policies, the weakening of social policies, the promotion of financial liberalization, along with the concentration of executive power. Overall, the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism provides an analytical lens for understanding the persistence of neoliberalism in the face of widespread discontent and the ways in which it has adapted to maintain its dominance.

On the other hand, neoliberalism should not be understood in a static and monolithic manner while its variegated and uneven effects could be grasped better by analyzing

its historically and geographically contingent forms with different phases of creative destruction of political-economic space (Brenner & Theodore, 2002a). In this regard, social unrest in diverse geographies manifested in the crisis context, based on economic inequalities, the failure to fulfill the promise of prosperity, the loss of credibility, and support of the traditional democratic institutions, which in turn have created fertile ground for authoritarian tendencies (Quiggin, 2018; Balaban, 2020). Furthermore, the legitimization crises of neoliberalism triggered the ideological crises, where prevailing neoliberal ideologies fail to resonate with the public, contributing to prefer authoritarian leaders with populist stance addressing the fear and anxieties of society. In this context, Gidron and Hall (2017) highlights that economic distress and cultural factors intertwine to generate support for right-wing populism, especially among the white working class in developed countries.

Within such authoritarian context, populism is an important strategy to consolidate power for political authorities as the breakdown of neoliberalism has necessitated a reorganization, which has taken place on the right wing with the rise of an authoritarian populist movement (Quiggin, 2018). Cahill et al. (2018) highlight that:

The material changes wrought over the last four decades and the growing crisis in their legitimacy have also produced conditions ripe for the cultivation of populism. Reactionary sentiments of nationalism, racism, sexism and anti-intellectualism have been seized upon and fostered by the political right – exemplified most recently by the election of Donald Trump, the successful ‘Brexit’ vote and high electoral support for far-right candidates in countries such as Austria, France, Hungary, Germany and Sweden (p.32).

The legitimacy crisis within the political-economic sphere has been increasingly channeled by the right-wing populist politicians in terms of socio-political mobilization. Although, Adaman et al. (2019) state that “the rise of authoritarian populism on both the left and the right of the political spectrum has been in response to the crises of neoliberalism, which have manifested themselves in faltering accumulation and growing socio-economic inequality” (p. 158). However, the right-wing populist autocrats deployed the national sentiments and a resurgence of nationalistic rhetoric in their political strategies. Altınörs and Akçay (2022) emphasize that the current global authoritarian wave has new strategies, including



erosion of welfare state, austerity measures, and financial and trade liberalizations, led by right-wing politics “which accompanied by nationalist and conservative political forces, who have employed populist polarization strategies either in order to come to power or to consolidate their rule if they were already in power” (p.1034).

Within the same line, Arsel et al. (2021) highlight the authoritarian turn in global politics under populist leaders “who came to, or consolidated their hold on, power by promising national resurgence through (re)industrialization, infrastructure construction and insulation of local communities from global economic forces” (p.1). In addition, Arsel et al. (2021) asserts that the attachment to neoliberalism is not primarily rooted in the commitment to market institutions “rather, the approach is one of developmentalism, wherein the state seeks to portray all societal problems as being resolvable by economic growth” (p.2). In this sense, with the promises of national glorification and nostalgia for greatness, authoritarian neoliberalism promotes developmentalism with populist tactics that secures consent for the rule of authoritarian leaders in the face of the intensifying economic, social, and political crises. Whereas neoliberal populist tactics foster state intervention in the economy to maintain power and stability. It also involves uniting the benefits of the ruling elite and working class by utilizing populist rhetoric and strategies to mobilize support from a broad cross-class alliance (Akçay, 2018).

These discussions underscore the multifaceted relationship between authoritarianism and populism, by focusing on the impact of the global economic crisis alongside the ideological and legitimization crisis in neoliberal hegemonic project. This is revealed in the social unrest in many countries despite diverse geographies, historical, and political contexts while populism has regained prominence, particularly through the rise of right-wing populist leaders either to sustain their hegemonic power or to establish one. In this regard, shaping narratives is fundamental for authoritarian populist leaders, enabling them to mobilize public support by addressing the fears and grievances of society. Within this context, this thesis frames technology as a pivotal area for populist autocrats in shaping their strategies. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend how populism operates, and populist strategies are constructed, which will be the focus of the next section.

## 2.2. Theoretical Underpinnings on Populism

There is a range of interpretations for populism, which is a complex and multifaceted concept, while scholars highlight different elements within their chosen framework to align with their inquiries. However, one of the primary shared aspects among different conceptualizations of populism is the relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The 'true' people are particularly those who have been adversely affected, marginalized, or excluded by an elite. This central theme across various definitions of populism takes different characters as 'us versus them' or 'people-enemy cleavage'. Urbinati (2019) also highlights that "A rich body of socio-historical analyses allows us to situate populism within the global phenomenon called democracy, as its ideological core is nourished by the two main entities—the nation and the people—that have fleshed out popular sovereignty in the age of democratization" (p.111).

Populism is conceptualized through a wide array of approaches, each offering diverse perspectives that highlight its complexity. These perspectives range from viewing populism as a political strategy or discourse to understanding it as an ideology that reflects deeper socio-cultural and economic dynamics. Mudde (2004), for instance, defines populism as 'a thin-centered ideology' which does not have a coherent core by stating that "populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (p.543). He emphasizes the demand-side factors driving populist support, including socio-economic grievances. Mudde acknowledges that populism can take different forms depending on the cultural, historical, and political context of a country. Thus, he highlights the contextual variations of populism, distinguishing between left-wing and right-wing manifestations. While recognizing populism's potential to mobilize marginalized groups and challenge established power structures, he also warns of its anti-pluralist /authoritarian tendencies.

On the other hand, Laclau's populism approach highlights the 'people' against an 'enemy' while populism is not tied to any specific ideology but is instead a discursive

framework that can be adopted by actors across the political spectrum (Arditi, 2010; Laclau, 2005). Laclau emphasizes the role of language and rhetoric in constructing this populist discourse within which a political force is created. In this sense, Laclau's approach highlights that the success of populism depends on the ability of political leaders to articulate and mobilize popular discontent, thus "all populist regimes take 'the name of the leader'" (Urbinati, 2019, p.113). In addition, Laclau's work with Mouffe emphasizes the centrality of discourse in hegemonic struggles (Popartan et al., 2020; Stavrakakis, 2017). In this regard, Laclau and Mouffe's discursive approach on populism utilizes the concept of hegemony in Gramscian sense as means of 'the formation and organization of consent' within the context of crisis:

From this point of view, a hegemonic perspective highlights the representational (and affective) mechanisms through which: (1) failures of established identifications and hegemonic orders can trigger a crisis of representation allowing populist and other actors to put forward alternative narrations of the crisis and of their proposed solutions; (2) "the people" comes to function as a discursive point of reference articulating the distinct political orientation of such populist actors; and (3) the ensuing articulation comes to rely on an antagonistic staging of the socio-political field along an us/them axis (Stavrakakis, 2017, p.535).

In the process of building hegemony, the meaning is constructed within various political contexts centered around the conflict between 'the people' and 'the other'. While 'the people' represented as an 'empty signifier', the meaning of a populist project is not inherently fixed and it constructed through discursive articulation. Thus, the framework of Laclau's work allows examining both the populism of an authoritarian leader and the populism of a political figure in a democratic regime.

On the other hand, Weyland (2017) points out that the discursive approach to populism, particularly Laclau's perspective, is influenced by the experiences of left-wing populists of Latin America in focusing on the demand-side of populism which reflects the will of the people. In this regard, Weyland (2017) proposes another line of thought in populism studies, namely the political-strategic approach. In contrast to framing populism as a bottom-up movement in discursive approach, he highlights the supply-side by asserting that populism is a 'top-down strategy' necessitating a leader to identify the people:

The people-a very broad aggregate-are amorphous, heterogeneous, and largely unorganized, they cannot exercise effective agency; collective action dilemmas preclude that. Instead, it is the very essence of populism that the rhetorically empowered people necessarily follow a leader who claims to act on their behalf. The typical populist move is to identify “the people” with this leader- and then vest in the leader the power emanating from the people (Weyland, 2017, p.54).

Weyland (2017) emphasizes that populism is best defined as a political strategy as “the actual role of ‘the people’ and their personalistic leader and to capture the distinctive connection between the leader and the mass followers that is constitutive of populism” (p.55). Within this framework, the leader thrives by mobilizing ‘the people’, who’s will the leader asserts to represent or embody. Thus, charismatic leadership becomes important in terms of exercising power and perpetuating the leader’s authority in the long run. Populism as a political strategy focuses on understanding “the principal ways and means by which a political actor captures the government and makes and enforces authoritative decisions” (p.55). In other words, populism consists of two key elements: “namely the type of political actor that seeks and exercises power; and the principal power capability which that political actor mobilizes as support basis” (p.56).

Within this line of thought, Barr (2009) defines populism as “a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages.” (p.38). Such framework conflates the principal aspects of a populist rule in terms of leadership, anti-establishment rhetoric, and the quality of the relation with the population. Even if charismatic leadership is important, the leader must be perceived as an outsider to the political establishment or a member of an established party who alters its norms while utilizing rhetorical strategies carries the essence of people and enemies’ division either emphasizing external or internal enemies. In this regard, Weyland (2017) highlights that “populism rests on personalistic leadership, seeks to boost its autonomy and power, and contests, pushes aside, or dominates other types of actors, such as elite factions and organized political parties. In particular, populist leaders combat the established political class and try to rise above it” (p.57). In addition, “plebiscitarian linkages” refer to the direct connection between the leader of the

movement and the public, bypassing established political structures and institutional channels. In essence, this aspect highlights the populist leader's ability to mobilize popular support without relying on established political institutions and evoking sentiments as “it is an ideology based on trust through faith more than trust through free and open deliberation (and thus also dissent) among the followers, and between them and the representative” (Urbinati, 2019, p.122). In this regard, charismatic leadership helps to perpetuate to gain and sustain support from the public while placing the leader as the true representative of "the people" and their collective benefits with personalistic connection.

Building on these discussions, the thesis deploys the political-strategic approach by framing populism a political strategy “through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercise government power based on direct, unmediated, institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001, p.14). The research aims to understand how political leaders pursue and sustain political power through social mobilization, as well as ‘the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power’ within a social formation. Thus, it should also be noted that populism, as a political strategy, should not be analyzed in isolation from the broader power relationships and structures within which populism operates. Rather than viewing populism as an autonomous phenomenon, it is essential to situate it within the intersection of social, political, and economic dynamics. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of populism necessitates an examination of how it interacts with and is conditioned by underlying structural factors, including economic policies, shifts in political representation, institutional arrangements, and transformations in global and national political context. As Weyland (2017) asserts that populism as a political strategy aims to strengthen its authority by challenging other political actors and opposing the existing political establishment.

In addition, Stavrakakis (2017) highlights that “an emphasis on the dialectic between hegemony and populism can facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of populist discourse and its implications” (p.535). He emphasizes that Laclau’s two criteria for the populist discourse in situating it within hegemonic struggles are crucial: the people as an empty signifier, a nodal point shaping a particular discursive ensemble,

and the reliance on discursive infrastructures imposing a dichotomic representation of society and power relations along an us/them axis (p.552). Within this framework, he highlights that:

Difference and antagonism play a crucial role in the formation and hegemonic potential of populist discourse. An empty signifier only makes sense against the background of deep societal grievances, of experiences of social lack (widening inequality, failure of representation, etc.), drawing its appeal from an often mythical promise to radically redress them (p.553).

In other words, the hegemonic potential of populist discourse emerges from broader societal dynamics and power relations while giving meaning to the people and the leader in the process. Thus, a populist strategy could be constitutive in hegemonic struggles. However, Yalvaç & Joseph (2019) highlights that “Laclau turns what should be a structural-strategic relation between social groups into something that is purely about discursive signification” (p.5). Rather, they propose to define populism as an instrument for achieving hegemony in a social formation by adopting a critical realist view of hegemony (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019). They state that populism has a structural basis while it is realized through hegemonic projects by stating that:

These hegemonic projects represent ‘attempts to mobilise support in favour of a far reaching programme of action’ Gramsci argues, to secure the unity of society ‘it is the task of organic intellectuals to organise the social forces’ and ‘to develop a hegemonic project’ that will ‘transcend the particular economic corporate interests of their social group by binding and cohering diverse aspirations, interests and identities into a historical bloc’ (p.6).

In this regard, they frame hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, in terms of not only economic basis but also political, ideological, and moral leadership of dominant classes while power is not maintained through coercion but also through the ability of dominant groups to shape societal values, norms, and belief systems in a way that secures consent from subordinate classes (Gramsci, 1971). Understanding hegemony in this broader sense allows an examination of how dominant classes maintain authority and how populist strategies navigate these dynamics to either reinforce or challenge existing hegemonic power structures. In addition, despite its often anti-hegemonic stance, populism does not necessarily dismantle hegemony; rather, it frequently seeks to establish its own. Populist movements, once in power, tend to

construct new ideological and institutional frameworks that reinforce their dominance, especially within the crisis context (Stavrakais,2017).

Within this context, the thesis discusses populism as a political strategy embedded in the broader political-economic structure, particularly in relation to the rise of authoritarianism within the crisis of neoliberal hegemonic project. For instance, Scoones et al. (2019) provide the overall dynamics of how populist consent is constructed within authoritarianism as follows:

In Gramscian terms, authoritarian populisms can emerge when the ‘balance of forces’ changes, creating a new ‘political- ideological conjuncture’. Drawing on populist discontents a transformist, authoritarian movement, often with a strong figurehead leader, gains ground, mobilising around ‘moral panics’ and ‘authoritarian closure’, and generating, in Hall’s words, ‘the gloss of populist consent’ (p.xv)

In addition to these discussions, it is critical to emphasize that some strategies /mechanisms are crucial to help perpetuating a populist agenda. For instance, Öniş et al. (2014) highlights the difference in right-wing and left-wing populisms through focusing on economic policies. They state that left-wing populists’ agenda revolve around reducing social and economic inequalities while “right-wing political actors, on the other hand, do not place redistributive policies and social equality at the top of their programmatic agenda; instead, they prioritize economic stability and physical security” (p.45) in their comparison of Kirchner of Argentina and Erdoğan of Turkey. Such an analysis helps to understand how a populist strategy can be employed to maintain power by focusing on specific fields. In this regard, technology serves as a powerful area to comprehend the populist strategy within the context of authoritarianism, which will be explored in the next section by focusing on examples around the world.

### **2.3. Authoritarian Populist Strategies in the Context of Technological Development through World Cases**

By framing populism as a ‘political strategy/project’ led by authoritarian leaders, diverse strategies, revealing different manifestations of the technology narrative, will

be discussed to organize the research themes for analyzing the case of Turkey. In this regard, Hungary, India, and Venezuela will be examined, as these countries are categorized as ‘electoral autocracies’ like Turkey in the 2023 V-Dem report. Moreover, there is a growing level of cooperation among the leaders of these countries, manifested in political alliances or economic partnerships and driven by their shared objective to challenge the ‘Western influence’ on the global stage.

The populist autocrats *Victor Orban in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, and Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela* exemplify authoritarian tendencies that undermine democratic principles. Their leadership has been discussed in terms of restricting media independence, suppressing dissent through legal measures, marginalizing opposition and minority groups, and promoting nationalism in their rhetoric, leading to a concentration of power. On the other hand, promoting technological development presents another facet of their authoritarian rule and populist strategies. Beyond controlling information and surveilling the population through digital infrastructure, their technology narrative serves their political agenda, in terms of creating a veneer of modernization and progress while entrenching to consolidate power and influence the public sphere to maintain power. Despite differences in their geopolitical environments and domestic challenges, these leaders embody similar strategies in engaging with technological development.

In addition to discussing these populist autocrats in India, Hungary, and Venezuela, China is also examined as a global leader in technology development even if Chinese authoritarianism is different than these examples in terms of its regime type.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the electoral autocracies in these countries, China has a rooted authoritarian system led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China's authoritarianism is characterized by a centralized, one-party rule that exerts extensive control over political, social, and economic life. While China's approach to technology development is integral to its authoritarian governance, China's authoritarian regime constructs its official discourse on technology around nationalism especially since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012 to legitimize the ruling Chinese Communist Party

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<sup>2</sup> China is defined as closed autocracy in the 2023 V-Dem report, [https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf)



(Wang, 2020). In addition, cooperation with China as a global power is important for populist autocrats in terms of boosting their position in the global arena. By examining China alongside populist autocrats in other regions, the varied ways in which authoritarian regimes utilize technology and China's role in cooperation with other autocracies is highlighted in the global context.

### **2.3.1. Hungary under Viktor Orbán's Leadership**

Viktor Orbán is the Prime Minister of Hungary, a position he has held since 2010, with a previous term from 1998 to 2002. As the leader of the right-wing populist party Fidesz, he won the 2010, 2014, 2018, and lastly 2022 elections, which is defined as a "crushing victory".<sup>3</sup> Until 2010, Hungary adopted extensive economic reforms inspired by neoliberal models and sought foreign direct investment to drive reindustrialization (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). The crisis context in 2008s and the failure of the Hungarian Socialist Party led Orbán into power. However, as Scheiring (2021) asserts that "the revolt of the national capitalist class against the power structure that sustained the liberal competition state was an essential structural condition that allowed Viktor Orbán back to power" (p.6) while Fidesz under the leadership of Orbán combined "institutional authoritarianism with authoritarian populism to reframe distributive grievances as cultural and to generate conflicts in fields where it can prevail" (p.9).

Within this context, Victor Orbán's leadership in Hungary has been extensively examined by highlighting his authoritarian rule and populist rhetoric aimed at consolidating power (Becker, 2010; Scheiring, 2019; Cooper, 2023). Under his leadership, Hungary has experienced a shift towards 'illiberal' democracy, marked by the centralization of power, erosion of judicial independence, and restrictions on media freedom. His government's opposing dissenting voices and manipulation of electoral laws are tactics employed to maintain his grip on power. Moreover, Orbán's exploitation of nationalist sentiment and anti-migrant rhetoric to mobilize support among the Hungarian electorate is strategies for further solidifying his populist agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> [Orbán scores crushing victory as Ukraine war solidifies support | Reuters](#)

Despite these controversies, Orbán remains a dominant figure in Hungarian politics, leveraging his control over various state institutions to maintain his party's influence and governance. One of the most significant rhetoric of Orbán is to blame the Western capital and country's dependence on it at the aftermath of 2008 global financial crises by promoting to defend national interests (Dürr, 2023). In this regard, Orbán has strategically positioned himself and his party, Fidesz, as defenders of national interests while their technology narrative has been flourished within the extent of this developmental agenda, through the promise of economic growth and prosperity. Thus, pursuing various initiatives aimed at developing technological landscape under Viktor Orbán's authoritarian populist leadership became an important agenda. This includes initiatives to invest in research and development, promote innovation, and attract foreign investment in tech sectors. In addition, being electric vehicle (EV) battery hub of Europe and bolstering Hungary's military capabilities through defense sector is important strategies for economic independence.

By framing technological development as necessary for protecting Hungary's economic independence, Orbán has cultivated a nationalist sentiment that resonates with many Hungarians who felt betrayed by the perceived failures of Western-style liberal democracy and capitalism. Technological development holds a fundamental position in fostering national sentiment for economic and political independence. In this regard, he does not only consolidate his political base but also allows him to cast opposition parties and critics as unpatriotic and aligned with foreign interests, thereby strengthening his leadership by emphasizing defending the nation against its enemies.

On the other hand, Orbán's government continue to prioritize fostering partnerships with international companies and countries as Scheiring (2021) highlights “foreign capitalists in the tech sectors are among the most important beneficiaries of Hungary’s authoritarian regime and are willing to contribute to its stability” (p.9). The foreign investment is justified on the basis of becoming a regional leader and global player while enhancing Hungary’s international reputation as well as protecting its national interest. For instance, Orbán and the government aim to make

strategic collaborations with China During in the 3rd Belt & Road Forum in October 2023 while he secured investments and new cooperation agreements with the China-based tech giant Huawei, despite domestic concerns and warnings from other EU about Chinese presence in strategic sectors.<sup>4</sup> Hungary has increasingly sought partnerships in the East for energy, exports, and investment, leading to stronger economic ties with countries like Turkey, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and particularly China. This investment strategy aligns with Hungary's goal of becoming a hub for both Western and Eastern high-tech cooperation, especially in a global environment marked by sanctions.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Orban's partnerships include plans to produce combat drones in cooperation with Israel and Germany, showcasing a focus on defense industry while aligning with influential allies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Orban's ambition to transform Hungary into Europe's electric vehicle (EV) battery hub<sup>7</sup> underscores his populist agenda, seeking to leverage technological advancements for economic dominance and international reputation. These initiatives, while portraying a commitment to technological development, serve to elevate the nationalist rhetoric.

Furthermore, the global cooperation with China's Belt and Road Initiative<sup>8</sup> also emphasizes the 'infrastructural populism' of Orban as Apostolopoulou (2021) highlights "urban transformation driven by the BRI signals the emergence of a new form of infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism" (p.3). This cooperation with China highlights both the strategic efforts to cultivate relationships with global powers and implementing technology projects to showcase progress. In this regard, promoting infrastructure development is another important area for Victor Orban and his party to disseminate the populist agenda to the local scale. This involves fostering digitalization and smart city initiatives. For instance, Orban's government launched a 'Modern Cities Program' in 2015, which presents smart urbanism as a crucial

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<sup>4</sup> [Orbán Doubles Down on Turning Hungary into a Regional Hub of Chinese Influence – chinaobservers](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.az/news/-hungary-seeks-to-boost-ties-with-china-amid-economic-recession-in-europe->

<sup>6</sup> [Hungary to produce combat drones in cooperation with Israel and Germany | The Times of Israel](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Orban Wants to Make Hungary Europe's EV Battery Hub - Bloomberg](#)

<sup>8</sup> [BRI synergizes 'Opening to East' of Hungary, promotes world economic devt - Global Times](#)  
[China greets Orbán as only EU leader at Belt and Road summit – Euractiv](#)

strategic objective. For instance, in the city Miskolc, Fidesz won 2010 local elections in Miskolc backed by national government, initiating a smart city project. Dürr (2023) highlights that “Miskolc’s smart surveillance project initiated by the pre- 2019 illiberal local government is wrapped up in an explicitly right-wing populist – and in certain respects racialized – social ordering campaign” (p. 556). Whereas urban development with high-tech emphasis is being promoted nationwide.

### **2.3.2. India under Narendra Modi’s Leadership**

Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, is a significant political figure known for his authoritarian populist approach since he became the Prime Minister of India in 2014. Subsequently, his party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the 2019 elections while BJP and NDA alliance won the 2024 elections. However, they did not achieve a clear majority of 272 seats in the Lok Sabha in the last elections. BJP is a major political party in India known for its Hindu nationalist ideology. Founded in 1980, the BJP has grown to become one of the country's two major political parties, alongside the Indian National Congress (INC). The party promotes policies that reflect its commitment Hindu values while BJP has implemented significant economic reforms and development projects. However, the party has also faced criticism for its approach to issues of religious freedom, press freedom, and minority rights in terms of undermining democratic principles and institutions in India.

Sinha (2021) states that “Modi is part of a recent global trend for ‘strong leaders’ whose political project combines neoliberal restoration with majoritarian appeal and is based on large electoral victories. His project lies on the more authoritarian end of the political spectrum labeled ‘the populist moment’” (p.322). In addition, Rogenhofer & Panievsky (2020) highlight that “Modi’s self-presentation as India’s “development man” entailed claiming the title of “the most reform-minded party” for the BJP and leveraged ‘right-wing neoliberal discourse[s]’ to discredit the Congress Party, whose role in liberalizing the Indian economy in 1991 made it the “natural party of reforms” (p.1397).

Within this context, populist politics employed by Modi discriminate minorities based on religious differences and ideological dominance of Hindu values to enhance

the division between us and them and the perception of serving the ‘true people’ by criticizing corrupted elite in Indian political context. Rogenhofer and Panievsky (2020) asserts that “Modi constructs the “people” by reference to an individualistic “development” vision, paired with technology enabled plebiscitary approval of his policies, through surveys conducted on the Narendra Modi mobile phone application that claim to evidence public support for the BJP’s policies” (p.1398). In this context, Modi effectively utilizes social media platforms to promote his campaigns, often leveraging them to amplify his message and rally support. However, this approach has also faced criticism, as social media under his leadership has been used by Hindu nationalist groups to spread divisive narratives and hate campaigns, as highlighted by recent reports detailing the rise of online hate speech and its impact on India's social fabric.<sup>9</sup>

Modi's technology agenda encompasses a broad range of initiatives aimed at transforming India into a global tech powerhouse, in relation to his commitment to elevate India's global standing, as reflected in the 2014 BJP manifesto, which pledged to build “a strong, self-reliant nation reclaiming its rightful place on the world stage.”<sup>10</sup> This agenda includes the launch of the Digital India Initiative, which seeks to bridge the digital divide and enhance online infrastructure across the country. His agenda also places a strong emphasis on fostering a thriving startup ecosystem by providing support and incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship in IT industry.<sup>11</sup> Emerging technologies, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), are being actively promoted as key drivers of economic growth and modernization.

In a Smart India event, he highlights the importance of developing national technology and not importing any technology by stating the country achieved a technological advancement under his leadership, what for others took a generation<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://time.com/6985284/india-modi-reelection-significance/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/technology/tech-news/design-in-india-design-for-world-what-pm-modis-new-slogan-for-technology-industry-given-on-independence-day-means/articleshow/112544365.cms>

<sup>12</sup> [India achieved in a few years with technology what took others a generation: PM Modi - The Hindu](#)

By this, he enhances both his primary pro-development agenda and his indispensable role in such achievements through rhetoric on technology. While Modi's technology agenda has its potential to modernize India's economy and society, he “used executive orders rather than the legislative route” by enhancing his strong leadership claims (Sinha, 2021). Technological development emphasis of Modi in especially driving modernization and development rhetoric alongside with economic growth becomes an important pillar in his populist agenda further enhancing to maintain his power.

Additionally, Modi has championed the development of 100 smart cities across India, promoting advanced technology to improve urban living standards, infrastructure, and governance. However, especially in developing countries, the smart city projects often cluster around the political use of the smart city agenda to legitimize controversial initiatives and authoritarian dynamics (Chang et al., 2021). (Datta, 2015) highlights that:

The 100 smart cities program in India has stoked the Indian imagination for a potential shift in state–citizen relationships – from a perceptibly corrupt and opaque bureaucracy to an imagined democratic space of digital governance. In this condition, high-tech digital interventions in housing, infrastructure and governance as envisaged in smart cities are also perceived as the route to wider democracy in India (p.53).

However, research on smart city transformation in Dholera, a small village with other 22 villages in the Gujarat region, is part of the 100 hundred smart cities agenda, reveals that how the entrepreneurial efforts in the national scale masks the dispossession of agricultural communities on the grounds of development, democracy and modernity rhetoric (Datta, 2015b). Even if the authoritarian tendencies underpinning Indian democratic governance promotes a rhetoric of citizen participation and social inclusion adopted by the government, (Ghosh & Arora, 2022) points out that “poor and marginalized citizens do not fit ‘smart’ visions of marketized technocratic development, particularly in highly unequal cities like Kolkata” (p.334). Meanwhile, Modi's ambitious smart city initiative has faced significant delays and has not met its original targets, drawing criticism from the

opposition.<sup>13</sup> Despite the challenges in implementation persist, Modi and his government remains committed to promoting and advancing the project by highlighting its financial benefits and smart cities as a cornerstone of the Modi's vision for a technologically advanced and modern India.<sup>14</sup>

### **2.3.3. Venezuela under Nicolas Maduro's Leadership**

Nicolas Maduro came to power in Venezuela following the death of President Hugo Chávez in 2013. Maduro, who had been serving as Vice President under Chávez, was designated as his successor by Chávez himself before his death. Subsequently, Maduro assumed the role of interim president and later won a narrow victory in the presidential election. His election victory was contested by the opposition, but he was officially inaugurated as president in April 2013. Maduro's rise to power marked by significant economic challenges and political unrest in Venezuela, a country that had already experienced its share of neoliberal policies in the 1990s. While, from 1999 to 2013, under Hugo Chávez's leadership, Venezuela shifted towards leftist policies, seeking to counteract the effects of previous neoliberal reforms as Kingstone (2018) asserts that:

The Pink Tide and the resurgence of the left in Latin America appeared, for a period, to challenge the dominance of neoliberalism in the region. The election of "Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1999 marked the start of a wave of electoral victories for a revitalized left. These leftist movements capitalized on the failure of neoliberal reforms to provide sustained benefits for much of the population. Between 1999 and 2010, leftist leaders gained power in several countries including Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela (p.213).

Despite the leftist orientation and progressive 'left-wing populism' (Weyland, 2017) during Chávez's tenure, Maduro inherited a complex situation characterized by deep economic issues and heightened political tensions. On the other hand, Venezuelan

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<sup>13</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/pm-promised-to-set-up-100-smart-cities-did-nothing-rahul-9329401/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/infrastructure-smart-cities-mission-modi-govt-reveals-big-update-on-projects-6650-completed-so-far-in-100-cities-3368921/>

authoritarian president Maduro, who does not have popular support as other populist leaders, still aligns with having authoritarian rule while the socio-economic crisis and domestic instability have been increasing in terms of “maintaining his power, he has become more radical, adopting authoritarian tactics on several fronts, including weakening state institutions, undermining checks and balances, polarizing society into two camps, and stacking the playing field against his opponents” (Oner, 2021, p.7).

Maduro's technology agenda underscores a strategic effort to leverage international technological partnerships to tackle Venezuela's economic challenges and elevate its global standing. Faced with domestic instability, Maduro has increasingly turned to technology as a critical tool for economic and social recovery and geopolitical maneuvering. Especially, he seeks to form alliances with technologically advanced nations and companies, particularly those outside the influence of Western powers, to secure investments. For instance, Maduro has stated his intention to seek Venezuela's membership in BRICS.<sup>15</sup> By enhancing economic and political ties with Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, he pursues an agenda to mitigate the impact of the sanctions and align with non-Western powers that share similar geopolitical interests. In addition, Maduro aims to modernize Venezuela's infrastructure, particularly in areas like telecommunications, energy, and digital finance, which are crucial for reviving the economy by fostering these partnerships.

These efforts also serve a two-fold purpose: addressing the immediate economic needs of the country while solidifying Maduro's political power by demonstrating his ability to bring technological advancement and economic opportunities to Venezuela despite external pressures. For instance, Maduro's visit to China, represented as a key ally, focused on bolstering bilateral cooperation in various technological domains, including telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and digital currency<sup>16</sup>. By engaging with China's tech giants like Huawei and ZTE<sup>17</sup>, Maduro promotes to

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<sup>15</sup> <https://tass.com/world/1728775>

<sup>16</sup> [President Maduro Begins Official Visit to China With Full Tech and Friendship Display in Shenzhen – Orinoco Tribune – News and opinion pieces about Venezuela and beyond](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Venezuelan President Maduro visits multiple Chinese cities, eyes cooperation in high-tech, SEZs - Global Times](#)



modernize Venezuela's infrastructure and expand its digital capabilities. In addition, he seeks alliance with Turkey 'to strengthen the tech cooperation' by signing agreements while asserting the 'US empire's arrogance.'<sup>18</sup> Overall, Maduro's technology agenda reflects an effort to harness global support for investments, economic development, geopolitical influence, and popular support to maintain his authoritarian power in the context of political and economic crisis.

#### **2.3.4. China under Xi Jinping's Leadership**

China operates under a deeply rooted authoritarian system led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in contrast to the electoral autocracies in Hungary, India, and Venezuela. The CCP's dominance allows it to implement policies and maintain stability without the constraints of electoral competition, enabling a sustained and far-reaching influence across all sectors of society. Beyond the emphasis on technology by populist leaders in India, Hungary, and Venezuela to maintain their power and sustain their regime, China emphasizes the country's role as a global leader in technology development while combines the elements of nationalism, national pride, and patriotism in representing their technological development. In this regard, while the contexts differ, the underlying principle remains consistent as technology serves as a tool for sustaining authoritarian rule and advancing state power.

By highlighting the “techno-turn” in official policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, Wang (2020) asserts that “China’s state propaganda apparatus more frequently employs scientific and technological achievements to portray China as a rising power and to boost patriotism and national pride” (p.220), He defines the three pillar of the techno-turn in Chinese nationalism as “the selection of megaprojects construction, overseas techno-economic business activities, and cutting-edge technologies as major issues in the techno-turn of China’s official discourse on nationalism was carefully calculated to maximize the propaganda effect by connecting China’s strength in scientific and technological development with its nationalistic sentiments” (Wang, 2020, p.226).

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tech/venezuela-seeks-to-strengthen-tech-cooperation-with-turkiye>

Within this context, the Chinese government's investment in and control over technological innovation have positioned the country as a leading global player while bolstering China's international influence and impact around the 'techno-development'. Whereas Lei (2023) points out that by quoting philosopher Slavoj Žižek and asserting that "he has gone so far as to declare China "the future of capitalism," noting that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 'has ironically proved to be a much more efficient manager of capitalism than liberal democracies.' The future of capitalism and Western world orders, Žižek argues, will be a mix between free market economic policies and the political and social authoritarianism exemplified by China and Singapore" (p.5).

On the other hand, Fanoulis and Cappelletti (2023) highlights that populism is not a new concept and still meaningful for China by discussing its historical roots and focusing on the discourse and narratives of the speeches of the President Xi Jinping, they state that "the Chinese political leadership emphasizes the unity (merging of people, leader, Party, nation) and the need for harmony in Chinese society, resuming rhetorical tropes which were common in the Mao era" (p.2). This broader discourse on unity, peace, and stability 'functions as a source of legitimacy' for the regime while the global hegemony struggle between the US and China intensifies amid the ongoing chip war.<sup>19</sup> This escalating tension over chip technology not only underscores the strategic importance of technology but also highlights the deepening rivalry between these two superpowers as they contest for global leadership.

Also, China facilitates state surveillance and censorship to maintain its authoritarian governance, which is framed within the context of 'tech-enabled/digital authoritarianism'. While the diverse implementations of the Chinese state have been criticized for expanding data collection and the use of smart technologies in exploitative ways, its dominance in the economic activities related to these technologies continues to grow. As Hoffman (2021) states that "On one hand, we see the Chinese party-state deploying extremely coercive applications of technology, most notably in places like Xinjiang and Tibet and with public security surveillance projects like the "Sharp Eyes" or "Skynet". But, elsewhere, it is technologies that

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67141987>

provide services or enhance convenience and problem solving that allow the party-state to expand and reinforce its power” (p.2). In addition, China’s smart city development, promoted nation-wide, presents technologies allowing mass surveillance with facial recognition, AI-powered cameras, and data analytics which supports government surveillance, tracking dissidents, and social control with credit systems. In sum, as China’s global impact and influence in technological development intensifies, the country also supports and collaborates with other populist autocrats. While this strategy is accompanied by the promotion of nationalism under the populist rhetoric of Xi Jinping in China, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Communist Party by appealing to a sense of ‘historical destiny’ and ‘cultural superiority’.

#### **2.4. Analytical Framework for Examining the Authoritarian Populism’s Engagement with Technology**

After scrutinizing the world cases, it could be concluded that autocracies seek to mobilize public support by both promoting development at the national scale and solidifying their position in the competitive global order. In this context, populism, employed by authoritarian leaders as a political strategy, plays a crucial role in extending their approach into the realm of technology. The political authority reinforces populist rhetoric centered on technology by emphasizing narratives of development, modernization, nationalism, global leadership, wealth, and prestige, while simultaneously ‘rhetorically empowering’ ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’. In addition, their interactions with each other contribute to the struggles for hegemony within the broader context of the global political economy.

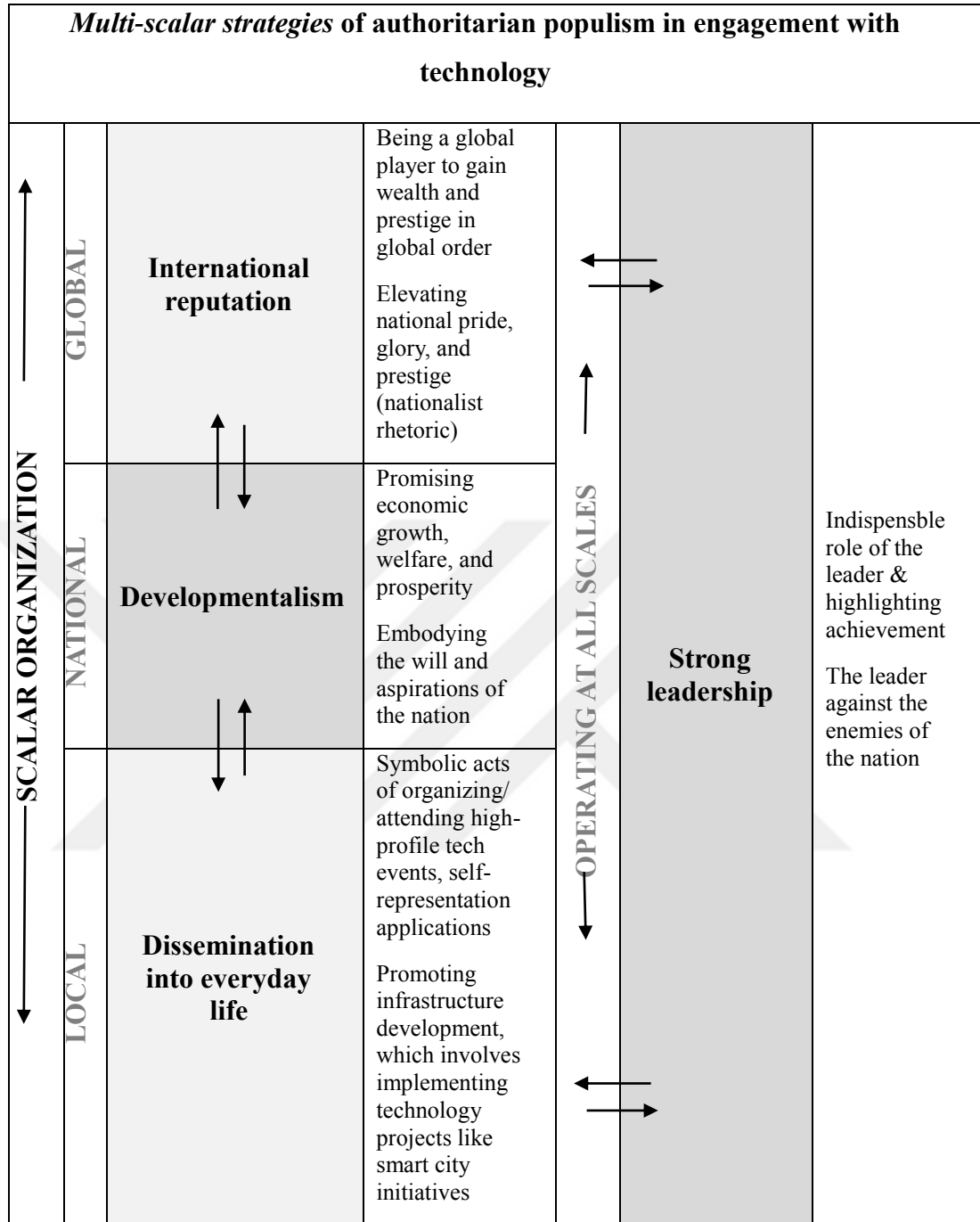
Additionally, the analysis of global cases has led to the formulation of strategies that illustrate how authoritarian populist projects engage with technology: *(i) developmentalism, (ii) strong leadership, (iii) international reputation, and (iv) dissemination into everyday life*. These themes are structured through using scale as an analytical tool, allowing an understanding of how strategies related to the technology narrative operate at and shaped by different scales, the national, global, and local. In this regard, the concept of scale is framed as a tool of abstraction to

produce knowledge and examine the relationality of each scale within various power structures (Bayırbağ, 2006). By deploying scale as an analytical tool, the research focuses on the distinct strategies at each level while also examining how they interact and reinforce each other. This approach emphasizes the constitutive role of each scale for others, asserting that they are relational and mutually produced through ongoing political, social, and spatial processes not isolated or hierarchal. Furthermore, this scalar perspective aims to illustrate the multi-scalar evolution of the technology discourse, demonstrating how it is simultaneously shaped by competitive global dynamics, national developmentalist agenda, and local practices within the context of socio-spatial dynamics which are illustrated in Figure 2.1. Through this framework, the research aims to capture the interplay between the different strategies within the broader context of authoritarian populist strategies.

One of the most fundamental scales through which the technology narrative is articulated and advanced is the national scale, within which the political authority disseminates its developmental agenda to shape public perception and mobilize support. In this regard, technology is not just about policy, but it has become a strategic tool for constructing a national vision that aligns with the political power's ideological objectives. Thus, the national scale strategies are examined through the theme of *developmentalism*.<sup>20</sup> These strategies are constituted around the developmental agenda in two interrelated axes: emphasizing material and symbolic aspects of technological advancement. In terms of material aspects, economic growth, national welfare, and prosperity are promoted and highlighted for overcoming dependency and achieving self-sufficiency. Whereas the political authority embodies the will and aspirations of the nation by emphasizing historical and collective identity of the nation in terms of constructing the symbolic aspect of the technology narrative. This symbolic addressing also constitutes the redefinition of the nation in accordance with the political authority's conception of the nation by technology infused framing. With this dual construction, the political authority legitimizes its rule as the embodiment of developmental objectives by generating a unifying vision.

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that developmentalism is used in terms of a generic sense, not to reference to the development theory in 20<sup>th</sup> century or national developmentalism debates.



**Figure 2.1.** Analytical framework/ Research themes

While the developmental agenda centered on technology disseminates across multiple scales with varying strategies—and is influenced by strategies at other scales—*strong leadership* remains a primary theme that operates across all scales. This theme is crucial in highlighting the indispensable role of the leader, constructing the leader as the ‘guardian’ of overall technological development. In this regard,

leadership constitutes the core of this narrative in terms of carrying the nation to its visionary goals while it also reinforces the populist stance of the technology discourse in unifying ‘the people’ with the leader. Through this, the leader is portrayed as the embodiment of the national will and technologically empowered future in legitimizing its political authority and securing electoral support. In addition, the populist dimension is particularly significant in emphasizing the role of the political authority as against the enemies of ‘the nation’. In this regard, the notion of leadership is also reinforced by emphasizing how a powerful leader sustains the stability of the country while bypassing the enemies of the nation. These enemies are generally framed along two axes: internal threats, often identified as opposition parties, former elites or past establishment, and external forces such as foreign governments, global institutions, or international actors.

A populist strategy aimed at bolstering an authoritarian regime is incomplete without extending to the global scale, which also serves to reinforce the domestic legitimacy. In this regard, international reputation becomes crucial for enhancing the nation's global recognition and influence, as well as for boosting national prestige, pride, and glory through technological advancement that constructs the central dimension of the populist strategy to mobilize public's sentiments and support. Additionally, forming partnerships and strategic collaborations with international companies and countries is a key aspect of strengthening global strategies to promote technological development. In turn, the developmental agenda and strong leadership claims are nurtured by extending the technology narrative to a global scale. The ability of the political leader to boost international reputation strengthens the authoritarian rule by reinforcing political power's claims of legitimacy and competence.

Furthermore, another significant scale for populist strategies is the local. A strategy primarily rooted at the national scale, aimed at achieving global recognition and led by a strong leader, must deepen its *dissemination into everyday life* dynamics to exercise its power and to solidify its technology narrative materially and discursively. In this regard, various strategies are pursued such as symbolic acts of organizing high-profile tech events and ‘self-representation’ through social media. Enhancing visibility in the public sphere through the promotion of technological advancements

is significant, as it facilitates social mobilization and public engagement. In addition, promoting infrastructure development, which involves implementing technology projects like smart city initiatives and digital governance platforms to showcase progress, is fundamental for organizing local scale. By focusing on these local scale strategies, authoritarian regimes strengthen their control and visibility, pursuing that the technology narrative penetrates everyday life and garners broad-based support.

In summary, developing multi-scalar strategies enables the diffusion of the populist agenda on technology, helping to sustain and legitimize authoritarian governance. This analytical framework could help to examine different manifestations of technology narrative in other countries, particularly in the context of shifting global economic and political balance with the rise of the autocracies. In the next chapter, the characteristic of Turkish context will be explored within its political economic context, by focusing on how the technology narrative has been shaped around the National Technology Initiative.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE PATH TO TECHNOLOGY DISCOURSE IN TURKEY'S POLITICAL ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

Rather, in terms of the capitalist type of state, policy is best understood as being molded around particular hegemonic projects, as expressed mainly by dominant political parties, whose relationship to the dominant regime of accumulation is crucial (Kelly, 1999, p.111).

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the period preceding the National Technology Initiative (NTI), by examining the socio-political and economic conditions that led to the NTI as an authoritarian populist strategy within the presidential system since 2018, as framed in this thesis. This part frames the AKP as a hegemonic power, presenting the role of the urban-based strategy in establishing and consolidating its hegemonic power. The second section analyzes the conditions that led to the development of the NTI. Based on this, the third section focuses on the development and evolution of the NTI by tracing its trajectory in analyzing key milestones and official policy framework. Through this analysis, the chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the NTI's role within the Turkish context under the rule of the AKP, in exploring the constitutive role of technology discourse to sustain and legitimize the new regime.

#### **3.1. Before the National Technology Initiative**

##### **3.1.1. AKP's Consolidation of Power**

To understand how technology serves as an ideological and symbolic, as well as material tool in advancing the AKP's populist strategy, to legitimize and strengthen



the new regime since 2018, it is crucial first to scrutinize how the AKP has managed to consolidate power for almost 23 years within the context of the gradual rise of authoritarianism. Even though the AKP initially defended democratic reforms within the framework of the European Union membership and has been supported by the West, Turkey has experienced an erosion of democratic norms and the consolidation of authoritarian control since the party's rise to power in 2002. The dynamics of authoritarianism has been marked by the weakening of organized labor, subordination of the military, the suppression of dissent, control on opposition, mass arrests, and media censorship. In addition, the state mechanism has shifted from a focus on decentralization to a new framework that emphasizes centralization at both the local and central levels with legal and institutional arrangements (Şahin, 2018; Kavuncu, 2023). These actions not only established the supremacy of AKP but also contributed to its authoritarian rule by consolidating power within the state apparatus. Ultimately, the centralization of power within the new regime, the Presidential Government System, became a major episode in the establishment of an authoritarian rule in Turkey through the 2017 constitutional referendum and the subsequent 2018 elections. As Yalvaç & Joseph (2019) highlights that:

The new system gives Erdoğan unlimited powers, allowing him to dissolve the parliament, call for new elections, make appointments to all positions within the state institutions, and run the country by issuing presidential decrees. There is no longer a separation of powers and an independent judiciary. Populist politics has polarised the country between the supporters of the AKP claiming to represent the people and the nation, and the other half that now represents the 'other people' or the 'second nation' (as witnessed in the formation of the 'People's Alliance' between the AKP and the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) on 20 February 2018 and the 'National Alliance' between the CHP (Republican People's Party), İP (the Good Party), HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), and the SP (Felicity Party) on 3 May 2018 (p.3).

To comprehend the progression of authoritarianism, the AKP era is typically divided into two periods, before and after the 2010s, in various scholarly studies. The scholars deploying mainstream approaches generally attributes this periodization in their analysis, as highlighted by Bedirhanoğlu (2022):

By developing a periodization that differentiates between two supposedly distinct and opposite phases of the AKP's rule. Defining the new period as

one of ‘de-democratization’, ‘electoral authoritarianism’, ‘competitive authoritarianism’ and/or ‘unconsolidated democracy’, they contrast the AKP’s earlier image of a democratizing agent with its post-Gezi standing as a regressive one that has been directing the country away from democracy towards some kind of hybrid regime (p.2).

As discussed in this quote, even if the shift towards authoritarianism was propelled by significant events such as Gezi Protests in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016, the structural dynamics and role of neoliberal capitalism should also be considered to understand the path to authoritarianism under consecutive AKP governments. The political economy perspective frames this trajectory in continuity with the AKP’s neoliberal policies throughout its rule and new strategies to maintain the crisis of the capital accumulation regime. In this regard, state power is significant to sustain the capital accumulation process by establishing a ‘hegemonic project’ in resolving the conflicting demands and interests of different social classes (Jessop, 1997). As the AKP emerged as the primary proponent of a highly desired hegemonic project aimed at establishing neoliberal politics in Turkey since 1980s, by embracing pro-market regulations as well as solving intraclass conflicts among capitalist class (Bedirhanoğlu et al., 2020; Erensü & Madra, 2020). The crisis-ridden context of the 1990s paved the way of the emergence of new political actors as Bayırbağ (2013) asserts that the AKP came to power after 2001 economic crisis as ‘the implementer of a neoliberal roll-out program’. Whereas the 2001 crisis provided the AKP ‘a moment of reconstruction’ by introducing a new hegemonic project in the midst of a severe economic and political instability (Özen, 2020; Akça, 2014).

In building its hegemonic project, the AKP shaped its economic policy in its early years by continuing “the preceding coalition government’s post-crisis macroeconomic strategy, including the establishment of independent regulatory institutions, inflation targeting and central bank independence, floating exchange rates and liberalized capital movements” (Özden et al., 2017, p.192) However, AKP governments also improved credit ratings, attracted significant foreign direct investment and the banking sector led to credit expansion in credit cards, consumer credits, and mortgages while overall deepening the financialization throughout their rule (Bedirhanoğlu, 2020; Yeşilbağ, 2022). However, the key driver of the economic growth in the AKP’s rule is the construction sector while high economic growth rates

helped the AKP to sustain growth through construction-led accumulation strategy, leading to a construction boom in Turkey until the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, (Balaban, 2011). As Yeşilbağ (2022) highlights that “underpinned by an aggressive construction drive, contemporary Turkey comes to the fore as an extreme case of a state-led land-based accumulation strategy and that this strategy has come to constitute the heart of the political economic machinery of the AKP regime” (p.2681).

Within the framework of the AKP’s neoliberal hegemonic project, economic gains in the period of growth were benefited by the sections closely linked to the AKP governments while diverse redistribution methods and social welfare programs fostered the creation of a broad-based coalition to mobilize public support and electoral backing (Kutlay & Öniş, 2024). On the one hand, the AKP fostered alliance among different fractions of capital, while on the other, it incorporated the working class into redistributive strategies to create a broad-based alliance. As Özden et al. (2017) highlights that the AKP have gained support of the broad sections of the working class by the expanded welfare programs, financial inclusion through consumer credit, and symbolic appeals to the lower classes' lived experiences while also:

The AKP managed to forge an alliance between the economically dominant and politically hegemonic sector—comprising big financial capital and the Istanbul based Western-oriented big bourgeoisie (organized under TÜSİAD)—and the economically improving but politically subordinated faction which comprised a large group of enterprises that manifest a much greater diversity of size and geographic location (predominantly but not exclusively MÜSİAD members). The political consequence of this alliance was to deepen neoliberal hegemony in Turkey (p.193).

In addition, the AKP’s ‘credit-financed form of Keynesian demand management (a novel combination of neoliberalism and populism)’ (Erensü & Madra, 2020, p.7) and social aids through local governments have become mechanisms for securing consent and expanding AKP’s electoral base. In other words, the AKP sustained its hegemonic power by promoting economic and social mobility within its base, achieved by broadening accumulation opportunities for local capitalists while

simultaneously offering social status and prestige to groups whose economic interests have been undermined by its neoliberal policies (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021).

Within this context, populism plays a crucial role in the AKP's consolidation of power. AKP's populist rule combines neoliberal austerity measures with the introduction of a new welfare regime and increased financialization while also securing consent through limited welfare measures, creating what is referred to as "neoliberal populism". Akçay (2018) highlights that "the measures to soften the blow of the austerity and privatization program involved two basic streams of policies: one consisting of redistributive welfare measures and the other aimed at entry of working-class households into financial markets" (p.10). In this regard, neoliberal populism in Turkey has led to the disempowerment of organized labor, contributing to an authoritarian climate in the country in terms of exclusion of labor while letting Erdoğan to collect power in his own (Akçay, 2018). Furthermore, AKP under the leadership of Erdoğan, has carefully crafted its political narratives, from the promise of democratization, overcoming military tutelage to national pride, building the 'New Turkey', nationalism and security, to secure and sustain electoral support. Özen (2020) asserts that:

AKP's discourse was, at the beginning, a distinct articulation of right-wing populism: a neoliberal development agenda accompanied by a moderately Islamic conservative political identity. Inherited to some extent from the former right-wing parties (Taşkın 2013), this discourse presented the AKP as the true representative of 'the people' against 'the power', which was portrayed in terms of the state elites ignoring or repressing the people's interests, aspirations and demands (p.5).

In addition, Erdoğan's populism is characterized by his claim to be an outsider to the political establishment while he portrays himself as a defender of the people against elite groups and foreign influence, frequently invoking themes of national sovereignty with a strong anti-establishment rhetoric. Erdoğan's populist leadership has gradually become the true representative of the nation as Aytaç & Öniş (2014) states "as he continues to win elections, he is facing fewer checks and balances, and analysts have increasingly begun referring to Turkey as 'Erdoğan's Turkey'" (p.45). This concentration of power has been further reinforced by the Presidential

Government System while also it serves as an ‘authoritarian fix’ to enhance the control over the state structure to solve the state crisis (Akçay, 2021). In this regard, Yalvaç & Joseph (2019) discusses the authoritarian regime change as a new era in the AKP’s populism as well as its hegemonic project as following:

Populism, as a hegemonic project, appears initially to be a democratic form of politics as evident during the rise and consolidation of the power of the AKP. In its initial stages, populism was an important instrument in resolving crises of hegemony from the pre-AKP period, encouraging the rise of counterhegemonic resistance by directing societal resentment against the established elites. However, once the AKP assumed political power, populist politics increasingly took an antagonistic form with a strict separation between the ‘people’ representing the AKP power bloc and the rest of the ‘people’. As it seeks greater hegemony, AKP rule has taken on an increasingly authoritarian form (p.2).

Overall, the AKP’s economic policies and populist politics played a pivotal role in consolidating power around its neoliberal populist hegemonic project with distinct phases over time. Based on the discussion in this section, the AKP’s power will be framed as hegemonic, in Gramscian sense as a novel combination of consent and coercion based on economic structure (Gramsci, 1971), particularly in discussing the urban-based strategy of the AKP, which will be explored in the following section in reinforcing the AKP’s hegemonic power.

### **3.1.2. Urban-based Strategy in Sustaining AKP’s Hegemonic Power**

In establishing the AKP’s hegemonic power, the construction sector became the key driver of economic growth while transforming urban fabric and advancing neoliberal urbanization since the party’s rise to power in 2002.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis on the construction sector is aligned with global dynamics, particularly the commodification of urban space as a key mechanism of neoliberal economic policies and its centrality

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<sup>21</sup> Diverse aspects of neoliberal urbanization in Turkey have been discussed by critical scholarship in terms of changing governance structures (Uzun, 2007); how it created new forms of urban wealth, poverty and displacement (Candan & Kolluoglu, 2008) and fostered grassroot movements (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010); exposing state intervention to land and property markets (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011); evolving legal and institutional frameworks (Kayasü & Yetiskul, 2014). In addition, many studies illustrated how neoliberalization in Turkey differentiates from global tendencies in terms of legitimizing the enhancement of authoritarian governance through urban policies rather than contributing to decentralization (Eraydin & Taşan-Kok, 2014; Tansel, 2019).

to capital accumulation. In this regard, the production of built environment functions to solve the overaccumulation problem while opening new revenues for capital and fresh terrains for speculation and market expansion through privatization of public land, large-scale infrastructure projects, urban transformation projects, and real estate development ( Harvey, 1981; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Smith, 2002; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). AKP's construction-driven political economic model follows this global neoliberal agenda to sustain economic expansion, attract investment, and consolidate political power.

In this context, the AKP has employed an urban-based strategy, relying on commodifying urban space and boosting construction sector, not only to stimulate the economy but also to consolidate political power by cultivating support from various segments of society through creating social, political, and economic benefits. The urban-based strategy of the AKP strategy is fundamental for establishing its hegemonic power by constituting a broad-based alliance among different classes and class fractions, allowing wide segments of society to benefit from neoliberal redistributive strategies that manufacture consent (Cavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014; Türkün, 2011; Yeşilbağ, 2016). As hegemony – rooted in a combination of consent and coercion – materializes through the production of urban space in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1974; Kipfer, 2002). In this regard, the AKP is “the moral leader of a national-popular project – a leader that can produce consent and, when it cannot, does not shy away from using force” (Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2013, p.141).

The urban-based strategy of the AKP in establishing its hegemonic power primarily depends on promoting urban rent through housing markets, mega-projects, and public investments in urban development by boosting construction sector. Urban rent serves as an economic benefit derived from urban land and property, facilitated by government policies to redistribute wealth across low, middle, and upper-middle classes, as well as benefiting construction firms and developers closely aligned with the AKP. It also helps to mitigate the adverse effects of declining real wages and income inequality while the growth of the construction sector was also helped to reduce unemployment with its ‘employment-generating capacity’ (Balaban, 2011; Tuğal, 2022).

In this regard, AKP used state power to bolster the growth of the construction sector through direct and indirect investments, as well as legal and administrative regulations to allow low- and middle-income groups to benefit from urban rents and secure political support as Balaban (2011) asserts:

Prominent among these regulations were the amnesties: in the first period, amnesties for illegal settlements, and in the second period, both zoning amnesties and initiatives to sell 2B lands. The aim of these amnesties was to enable particularly low-income social segments to benefit from urban rents and, in turn, secure their political support. Similarly, it can be considered that housing production and credit provision through TOKİ were intended to have similar effects on low- and middle-income social segments. Social housing projects primarily targeted the support of low-income groups, while housing loans and cooperative housing production aimed to garner the support of middle and upper-middle-income groups (p. 25).

As the above quote highlights, housing serves as a key area in manufacturing consent for AKP's hegemonic project. While the political potential of housing policies in securing electoral support, particularly by targeting squatter settlements, is not a new phenomenon in Turkey (Erman, 2001; Şengül, 2009), the AKP expanded and institutionalized its strategy through enacting laws and strengthening key state institutions such as the Mass Housing Development Administration (TOKİ). This enabled the diffusion of its hegemonic discourse and legitimization of the related policy innovations (Türkün, 2011). By promoting the vision of 'Building Turkey of the Future' through TOKİ, the AKP governments mobilized large-scale social housing initiatives and urban transformation projects, presenting them as pillars of economic growth as well as modernization, development, and social progress. In this sense, the projects of TOKİ were framed not only as a means of improving living conditions but also as the symbols of the AKP's narrative of 'serving the people.' Through an extensive amount of state-led construction projects, the AKP positioned itself as the primary provider of urban development, reinforcing its legitimacy and deepening its political influence. Within this context, the AKP increasingly utilized urban-based strategy to consolidate its power, which helped it maintain political dominance for a long time by securing the support of the urban poor in particular (Şengül, 2015).

In addition to housing provision and facilitating employment opportunities, the AKP aimed to secure consent through social support programs in local governments,

which also served to encounter resistance from the public for AKP's aggressive urbanization policies as Çavuşoğlu & Strutz (2013) highlight:

The AKP has cleverly countered this by a consent production it calls 'social local governance' (*sosyal belediyecilik*), often taking the form of charity for the city's poor, such as fridges in summer and charcoal in winter. The city's Islamic-oriented municipalities have also designed and invested in non-alcoholic common spaces, formed horizontal aid networks, and established people's assemblies and complaint points, in this way establishing bodies for negotiation in cities (Yavuz 2009: 60). Although such examples cannot be considered as democratising local politics, but rather as policies meant to produce consent, they have certainly been successful in producing an illusion of democracy among the masses (p.149).

These political strategies reinforce the AKP's image as a defender of the disadvantaged, fostering a sense of inclusion through its conservative agenda while simultaneously reinforcing mechanisms of exclusions. In this regard, Şengül (2015) highlights that the AKP's conservative project is closely linked to the commodification processes targeting the economic sphere, but its distinctiveness lies in its focus on the social domain as it recodes urban space according to its own values, designating social groups that reject this imposition as enemies and labeling their spaces as enemy territory (p.6).

On the other hand, the AKP favored business elites, consisting of pro-government construction firms and real estate developers, which had privileges to access state contracts and public land privatizations. Through public-private partnerships and government-backed financing, these actors have been able to accumulate wealth, reinforcing a patronage network that intertwines economic power with political loyalty. Megaprojects have played a significant role in supporting the clientelist business networks of the AKP as Tuğal (2022) highlights that "Turkish megaprojects serve openly political purposes such as mass employment and mass housing, as well as regime grandeur and consolidation of Erdoğan-connected businesses" (p.12). By channeling state resources into megaprojects, the AKP strengthened its ties with pro-regime business elites ensuring their continued support. Moreover, these projects serve as symbols of national progress and modernization, aligning with the AKP's broader narrative of development with populist strategy, which has been central to



AKP's hegemonic project. The symbols of this era, epitomized by mega projects, have been shared as a source of pride while becoming the tools of Erdoğan's populism to foster his strong leadership image. The populist stance around the megaprojects were the manifestations of the nationalistic revival, glory, and 'serving the people', as Asci (2020) quotes Erdoğan's speech about megaprojects as following:

Just like Constantinople was alienated, corrupted, and in decay, waiting for Fatih Sultan Mehmed to liberate it, according to neo-Ottomanist discourse, Turkey has been deprived of its true potential, its imperial glory under the corrupt rule of the Kemalist elite who overlooked the demands and needs of its citizens. The mega transit projects, in this sense, are representatives of the rising power of the whole nation, tools for building the self-confidence of a neglected nation. "You deserve these works," Erdogan stated in another public speech. "These infrastructural works suit only you... This nation deserves such works... We have a duty and we will continue to carry out this duty..." (p.85).

As the above statement reveals, megaprojects symbolize the nation's resurgence and the fulfillment of its true potential and aspirations to achieve developmental goals at the national level. In addition, megaprojects, especially located in İstanbul such as Third Airport and Third Bridge, promoted as the symbols of the country's overall development. In this regard, Şengül (2015) discusses how AKP's 2011 general election program was like a local election manifesto as the rhetoric of the 'Crazy Project', which focused on large-scale, Istanbul-centered projects, became a central element of the AKP's election strategy. Yeşilbağ (2022) also asserts that "a sort of construction frenzy, characterized by a persistent focus on the built environment, alongside with grandiose projects and lavish inauguration ceremonies, has been a fundamental element of the AKP's discursive universe" while "the construction frenzy was most conspicuous during the 2011 election period, when a series of mega-projects took center stage in the party's campaign. The AKP's election proclamation included a range of ambitious mega-projects. Since then, these mega-projects have been extensively utilized as propaganda tools" (p.2688). These projects play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing a populist discourse that frames the government as the true representative of the people and the nation. In this context, megaprojects are not framed just for promoting economic growth, they act as a discursive instrument

to signify AKP's hegemonic power to consolidate public support. Megaprojects serve as the symbols of the AKP's power to deliver prosperity and transform the nation while mobilizing public support and sustaining legitimacy of its rule. Thus, the populist strategy around urban-based projects support both the material and symbolic tools for the AKP to grip on power.

However, the hegemonic power of the AKP is also challenged with Gezi Park protests, emerged as a reaction to the privatization of public spaces and infrastructure expansion at the expense of environmental and social concerns. The AKP responded with repression and force against the protests like the response to environmental movements such as the resistance against hydroelectric power plants (HES) in rural areas (Adaman et al., 2019). Gezi Park protests provided justification for a widespread suppression of dissent, including mass arrests, and media censorship by AKP government while enhancing its authoritarian rule by coercion. However, the protests also revealed fractures in AKP's hegemony and the party's populist discourse claiming to represent 'the people/the nation' against its enemies (Özen, 2020). Şengül (2015) highlights that the AKP, which has built its populism from the top down, found itself positioned as the 'new elite' in the face of the Gezi uprising, which brought together segments of society labeled as 'looters' and 'marginals' by the ruling power (p.11). As Özen (2020) highlights that "the new regime that AKP turned to build after the Gezi has relied on winning the consent of some segments to the use of coercion against the others" (p.14).

To sum up, the construction sector has become the key driver of economic growth through commodifying urban space by utilizing state resources and institutions, public-private partnerships, and legal and institutional arrangements in establishing AKP's hegemonic power. AKP maintained control over low- and middle-income groups by redistributing urban rents, primarily through housing policies, while also relying on the construction sector's 'employment generating capacity' and social aid through local governments to compensate for the neoliberal agenda, in generating consent. At the same time, the AKP nurtured politically aligned construction firms, fostering loyalty and economic dependency. In this context, megaprojects played a crucial role as well as housing policies, serving as mechanisms in reinforcing the

AKP's populist narrative through promoting development, progression, and national resurgence. However, this urban-based strategy of the AKP has faced political challenges during Gezi Park protests as well as the economic challenges since 2011, paving the way for new arenas of legitimacy, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.2. The Crisis Context and the New Legitimacy Quest in Technological Development**

The AKP sustained its hegemonic power through its urban-based strategy until the gradually deepening economic crisis since 2011 general elections. Even though Turkey didn't experience severely the shocks of 2008 Global Financial Crisis, negative growth and the rise in unemployment to about "14% in 2009 marked a significant setback to the accomplishments made during the heyday of economic expansion, which spanned from 2002 to 2007" (Öniş, 2012, p.143). The drawbacks had already started by the time 2011 general elections and when the US Federal Reserve (FED) declared its intention to slow down monetary expansion in the post-2013 period (Bedirhanoğlu, 2022). This global crisis context further increased the AKP's dependence on construction sector and megaprojects, particularly those centered in İstanbul around "crazy projects" starting from the 2011 general elections (Şengül, 2015; Yeşilbağ, 2022).

Within the context of the regime change, the currency crisis in August 2018 elevated the structural crises to another level with the economic policy of Presidential Government System. In this period, the political interventions of AKP, especially Erdoğan as a president, to economy policy with populist tendencies elevated as Bedirhanoğlu (2022) asserts that "One of the defining public images of Turkish President Erdoğan in economic policy-making from roughly 2013 to the end of the decade was a leader defending the interests of his people against the so-called 'interest lobby', which tried to impose its own priorities on the government" (p.97). Since 2018, Turkey has experienced a persistent economic crisis characterized by high inflation, currency devaluation, and stagnating economic growth, rooted in both structural and policy-driven challenges such reliance on foreign capital flows,

construction-led growth, and economic policy of the new regime including cuts to interest rates despite high inflation. As Bedirhanoglu (2022) states that:

These events highlighted the increased disciplinary power of financial markets over the indebted Turkish state, companies, and households/laborers. This power stemmed from the state's need to finance persistent budget deficits, capitalists' necessity to seek profits and investment in a competitive financialized world market, and laborers' struggle to survive through credit. Ultimately, these groups have been locked into a vicious cycle of debt recycling to sustain themselves within Turkey's financialized capitalist system (p.103).

The economic crisis has had profound socioeconomic consequences, deepening inequality, increasing unemployment, and affecting low- and middle-income households in terms of locking them to debt cycle because of rising prices in food, energy, and housing (Balaban, 2019). In addition, the crisis context created drawbacks in the construction sector while the construction sector's crisis, with rising costs, declining investment, decreasing housing prices and sales, exacerbated the economic crisis. Yeşilbağ (2020) highlights the crisis dynamics in the construction sector as follows:

High interest rates, collapsing house prices, declining sales and over 1 million unsold units added to the stock in the last 6 years indicate that the sector is going through a serious bottleneck. Moreover, this bottleneck is occurring despite a number of stimulative measures by the ruling AKP to keep the sector afloat, including tax reductions, housing campaigns, and low-interest housing credits through public banks. With a 20% share in liquidated firms since 2017, construction and real estate sectors are among the most adversely affected sectors by the recent economic turmoil. Furthermore, these two sectors own a major 23% share of total non-financial foreign debt burden, which is the weakest point of the Turkish economy. Apart from these, indicators on public private partnership contracts with treasury guarantees reveal the significant burden of the sector on public finance.

These setbacks disrupted AKP's long-standing reliance on construction-led economic growth despite stimulative measures by the AKP. Whereas the economic crisis both marks the diminishing economic benefits of the construction-led growth model and its capacity to generate political and social cohesion. In this regard, the deepening socioeconomic crisis together with the crisis in the construction sector required the

AKP and its leader to seek new strategies both for economic growth and expanding the political narratives to legitimize the new regime. Within this context, this thesis claims that the urban-based strategy of the AKP is ‘exhausted’ over the period of two decades to offer economic and social benefits for society while the AKP and its leader crafted its political narrative centered on technology to reinforce the new regime and to preserve its hegemonic power. While this does not mean that the urban-based strategy has been left, the regime’s legitimacy is reinforced by reproducing its populist project with the technology discourse. As the foundations of its hegemony began to crumble, the AKP strategically broadened its rhetoric to adapt to the shifting political and economic dynamics. Accordingly, the new legitimization quest was reflected in the emerging technology narrative around the National Technology Initiative.

In addition, the strategic importance of the construction sector was tried to be substituted by promoting the defense sector. Although the emphasis on the defense industry began around 2006 and gained momentum in 2008 with the MILGEM project, further accelerating in the 2010s with Baykar and Kalekalp’s production of domestically made UAVs, the role of the defense industry has also been amplified alongside the advancements in various other sectors around the National Technology Initiative. Ultimately, the overarching strategy is built on the broader perspective of technology to legitimize the new regime and reproduce the populist strategy in the midst of such a crisis. Even if the technological development has been a long-standing aspiration of Erdoğan throughout his 23-year tenure, reflecting a broader legacy inherited from Turkey's right-wing political traditions<sup>22</sup>, the new narrative

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<sup>22</sup> In this regard, exporting technology products and the rhetoric of producing national technology have represented the two sides of the same coin in Turkey’s commitment to advancing technology. In 1950s, making Turkey ‘Little America’ was a significant rhetoric with a populist stance while the technology export from USA was dominant within the framework of Marshall Aid. In 1960s, with the establishment of the State Planning Organization, the Scientific and Technical Research Council, and the introduction of the development plans, the focus on technological development had a more comprehensive framework. Supporting R&D practices, the advancements in industrialization, and the development of defense industry became prominent in 1970s with the establishment of key institutions such as Military Electronics Industry (ASELSAN). The introduction of neoliberalism in 1980s and in 1990s highlighted the integration with the West while the efforts around establishing techno-parks and reducing the foreign dependency in defense industry became important rhetoric of both Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel. Also, Islamic right-wing *Milli Görüş* movement of Necmettin Erbakan, which the AKP is rooted, emphasized the significance of national technological development in its narrative in 1990s.

around the National Technology Initiative holds its novel significance. As it not only encompasses diverse fields in technological development but also intensifies populist rhetoric across multiple scales—global, national, and local. This newly framed populist strategy has been extensively promoted since the establishment of the new regime in 2018, positioning it as a cornerstone for shaping Turkey's future. As President Erdoğan has encapsulated this vision by stating that “Today, we have a Turkey that sets its sights on space, on high technology, on artificial intelligence, and embraces the future.”<sup>23</sup> The establishment of the National Technology Initiative will be explored in the following section.

### **3.3. The Establishment of the National Technology Initiative**

#### **3.3.1. The Vision of the National Technology Initiative**

The leading vision of the National Technology Initiative (NTI) is articulated in numerous statements by President Erdoğan and other key political figures of AKP, as well as in official strategic documents. According to these, NTI is a *vision, guide, roadmap, soul*, and the very essence of Turkey's ambition to achieve self-sufficiency in technological development. Central to the NTI is the emphasis on ‘domestic and national (*yerli ve milli*)’ production across all sectors, reflecting a strategic effort to reduce dependency on foreign technology and strengthen national sovereignty. The NTI is portrayed as a crucial pillar in Turkey's broader economic and political agenda, aiming to position the country as a leading technological power on the global stage, characterized by the technological race.

In the 2022 publication of Turkish Academy of Sciences (TUBA) dedicated to the NTI titled *National Technology Initiative: Social Reflections and Türkiye's Future*, the vision encapsulated in the NTI is defined as following in the foreword of Mustafa Varank, the former minister of Industry and Technology:

The National Technology Initiative, which we launched under the leadership of our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is the name of the vision that will

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ulkemizi-dunyanin-en-buyuk-10-ekonomisinden-biri-haline-getirmek-icin-daha-buyuk-projelere-daha-buyuk-yatirimlara-yoneldik>

ensure Türkiye's economic and technological independence, and the conceptual definition of our efforts to maximize our ability to design, develop and produce critical technologies and products with national capabilities (TUBA, 2022).

The same publication also addresses NTI from various angles such as, its social mobilization, economic beneficiaries, role in defense industry, importance for techno-parks, space technologies, smart cities, and healthcare with its 37 chapters. The foreword of President Erdoğan in the publication reflects the importance given to the NTI in shaping future policies, and how this publication helps to sustain the vision of NTI while translating it into ‘a scientific corpus’:

With the National Technology Initiative, Türkiye has started to reach the position of a country that does not follow behind but rather pioneers and paves the way for technological revolutions in many areas. With the public and private sectors of all fields, we are determined to take advantage of every opportunity to take our technological development to a global level and to take an active part in international competition (p.2).

In addition, as previously discussed, while Turkey’s efforts toward self-sufficiency and the conceptual framework of ‘domestic and national’ production in technology are not entirely new, the rhetoric surrounding the NTI has been significantly amplified under the new regime, particularly with President Erdoğan’s enhanced role and centralized executive powers within the presidency. On the one hand, new institutional arrangements have been established during this process, reflecting an effort to restructure the state apparatus in supporting the national technology agenda. On the other hand, Erdoğan’s personal embodiment of the technology narrative has become prominent as a central figure. This is particularly evident in his participation in major technological events such as Teknofest, inauguration ceremonies of defense industry facilities, and high-profile site visits to factories such as TOGG. In this context, Erdoğan not only delivers speeches but also employs symbolic visual strategies such as appearing in military uniforms or photographed alongside tanks, fighter jets, and battleships. These images serve as powerful tools in linking his leadership to the country’s technological progress. Also, the technology narrative is woven into everyday life through billboards and public displays, turning urban space into a spectacle where the political authority reinforces and celebrates its technology agenda



**Figure 3.1.** Large-Scale Billboard of Erdoğan in the Next Level shopping mall entrance in Ankara (Photo taken by author, November 2023)

In addition to the symbolic construction of the NTI, its institutionalization is also essential for its official establishment. This process entails embedding the NTI within the formal structures and policies of the government, thereby ensuring its integration into the broader development strategy. This process also involves the creation of new institutions and altering the existing ones, within the framework of the Presidential Government System. This institutional framework not only solidifies the NTI's role in authoritarian populist strategy but also ensures its implementation across various sectors. In the next section, the trajectory of these institutional shifts will be explored, highlighting key documents and significant dates.

### **3.3.2. The Institutionalization of the National Technology Initiative in the Context of the Presidential Government System**

The National Technology Initiative (NTI) is officially announced in the 2018 election manifesto of the AKP and introduced by President Erdoğan in a publicity meeting. In this meeting, Erdoğan outlined the launch of the NTI by highlighting the nationalization in the key sectors, that would be prioritized under the initiative, such as digitalization, industrialization, urbanization, education, health, national car



production, and defense industry.<sup>24</sup> This initial official declaration of NTI in 2018 election manifesto emphasized as following:

In the upcoming period, by increasing the resources allocated to R&D and innovation, we will shift the focus of support towards product-based commercialization and encourage the transformation of expenditures in this area into added value, *thus initiating the 'National Technology Initiative'*. The essence of our National Technology Breakthrough will be formed by the high-tech products we will produce in areas needed by our country, especially in the defense industry, based on our qualified human resources, domestic financial resources, and technological infrastructure, and the national technological capabilities we will develop with these capabilities (p.199).

Before 2018, the NTI is mentioned by Selçuk Bayraktar, Baykar's Technology Leader and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Turkey Technology Team (T3) Foundation, in a meeting held at Istanbul Technical University in April 2017. In this meeting, Bayraktar discussed Baykar projects of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and the importance of the technological transformation in the defense industry with national concepts by stating that "We can call this the 'National Technology Initiative'. If we want, we can call it 5.0 or 10.0, but it must certainly be in accordance with the conditions we set."<sup>25</sup> In another news in October 2017, Selçuk Bayraktar mentions that "*unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) ignited the spark for the National Technology Initiative.*"<sup>26</sup> As until 2017-2018, the strategic prioritization on national production and domestic procurement was established in the defense sector within the framework of the Ninth Development Plan (2007-2013) and Tenth Development Plan (2014-2018), as well as the strategic documents of The Undersecretariat for Defense Industries.

In 2019, the NTI was formally recognized as a comprehensive policy framework within the Eleventh Development Plan (2019-2023), following the AKP's electoral victory and Erdoğan's inauguration as the first president under the Presidential

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<sup>24</sup> [İşte AK Parti'nin seçim beyannamesi \(aa.com.tr\)](http://aa.com.tr)

<sup>25</sup> [Selçuk Bayraktar: İHA havada 100 bin saati geçti - A Haber Son Dakika Gündem Haberleri](#)

<sup>26</sup> [\(Milli İHA'ların kalbine ziyaret\) Selçuk Bayraktar: Toplumsal dönüşüm başlıyor, uçan arabalara bineceğiz \(gunes.com\)](#)

Government System. In the second note of the development plan's introduction, the NTI is envisioned as a long-term policy orientation in 15 years perspective:

The Development Plan, designed as the first five-year segment of a 15-year perspective, envisions initiating comprehensive change and progress in every field and implementing it continuously with determination from a long-term perspective. During the plan period, the structure of the economy is to undergo a transformation to ensure long-term stability and sustainability. This includes enhancing human capital through an educational initiative and increasing technological and innovation capabilities *through the National Technology Initiative* (p.1).

Building on the direction established in the Eleventh Development Plan, various strategic documents have been developed and presented across different sectors to realize the objectives of the NTI. These include the 2020-2023 National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan, the Strategic Documents of the Turkish Space Agency, and the 2021-2025 National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Document, among others. Particularly, 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy Document, presented in 2019 by the Ministry of Industry and Technology, is a crucial document to actualize the NTI. The Ministry also presented its Strategic Plan for 2019-2023, revising it in 2020 to cover the period 2020-2024, and Strategic Plan of 2024-2028 recently.

In 2023, the year celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic, the AKP has introduced “Century of Turkey (*Türkiye Yüzyılı*)” as the primary policy direction for 2023 elections. National Technology Initiative is framed as the predecessor of Century of Turkey, as stated by Erdoğan:

Regardless of the conditions, thanks to our unwavering commitment to the National Technology Initiative, we are now able to talk about the Century of Turkey. We are determined to realize our Century of Turkey vision in the increasingly important fields of efficiency and technology for the world of the future. God willing, just as we have done over the past 20 years, we will once again achieve this together as 85 million people, including the public sector, private sector, universities, and students.<sup>27</sup>

The Century of Turkey vision is extensively presented in the AKP's 2023 election manifesto of AKP, which also reviews the party's achievements over two decades

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-milli-teknoloji-hamlemiz-sayesinde-turkiye-yuzyilini-konusabilir-hale-geldik/2804419>

and highlights its core principles. In addition, the "Century of Turkey" is a roadmap for a strong, influential, and globally significant Turkey in the new century. It is based on seventeen core principles, including Peace, Digital Innovation, Future, Development, Strength, Sustainability, Justice, Harmony, Communication, Success, Science, Values, Youth, Stability, Compassion, Production, and Efficiency. Beyond defining Turkey's future vision, it also represents a model for development and democracy in regions such as Europe, Africa, and South America, where significant changes are needed. In this sense, National Technology Initiative plays a crucial role as put on the 2023 election manifesto:

To make our country one of the leading nations in technology, we have outlined the vision of the National Technology Initiative to develop national and unique technologies for all critical products, increase high value-added production, and train a skilled workforce in technology development... In line with our vision of Turkey, which derives its competitive strength from its technological superiority and fosters this superiority from an early age through the Teknofest generation, our fundamental goal is to realize the National Technology Initiative (p.272).

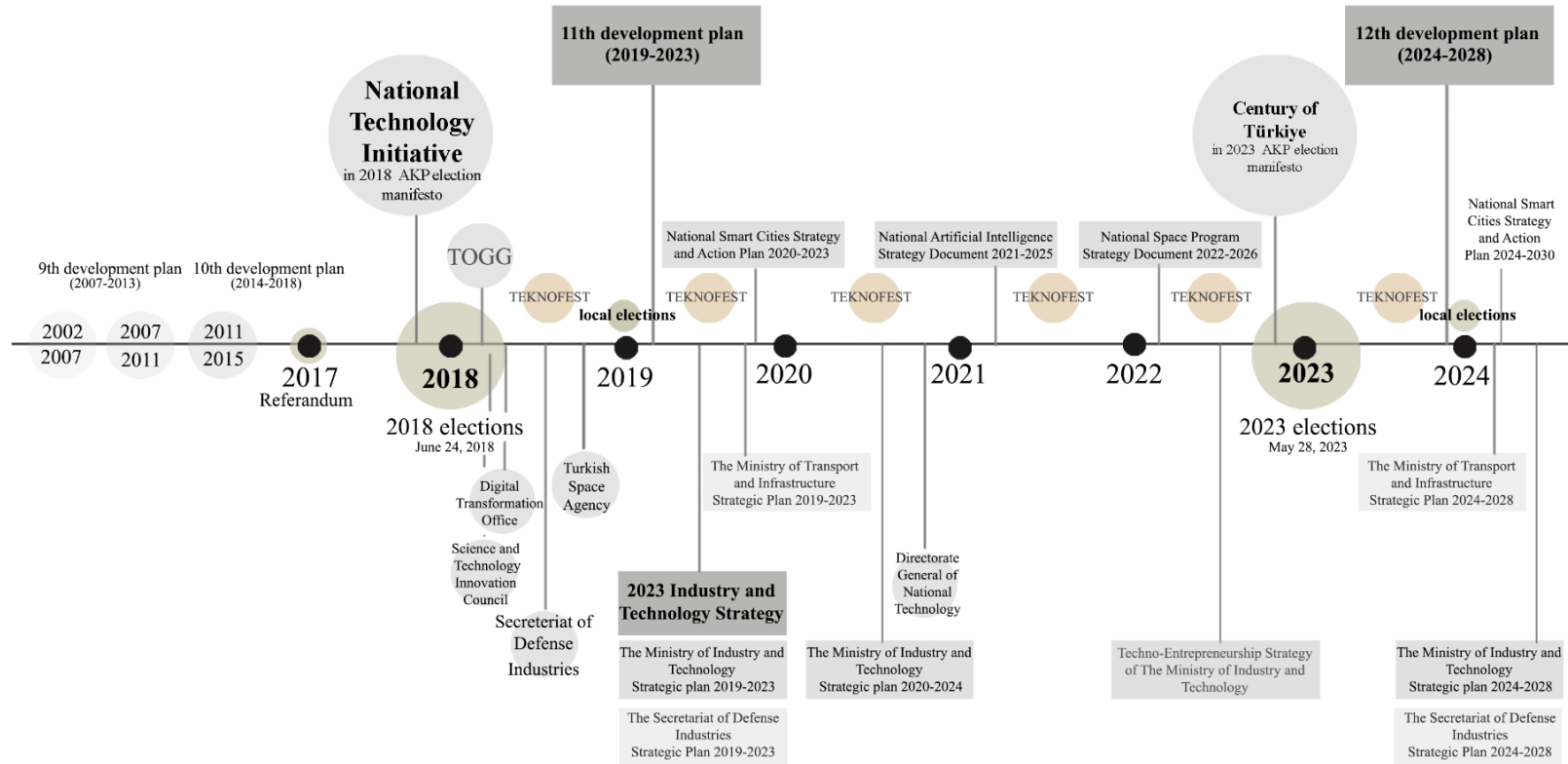
In the 2023 election campaign, framed within the vision of the Century of Turkey, the AKP emphasized the concept of a self-sufficient, strong, and prosper Turkey. The campaign highlighted significant technological advancements in the defense industry, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), drones, and tanks, showcasing these as symbols of national strength. Additionally, the AKP introduced new national symbols such as TOGG, Turkey's first national electric car developed through a collaboration of domestic private companies with state support. The campaign also celebrated Turkey's achievements in space exploration by spotlighting the country's first astronaut and his notable space journey.

Following the AKP's victory in the June 2023 elections, the 12th Development Plan was introduced to advance the Century of Turkey vision. This plan emphasizes development driven by advanced technology and focuses on fulfilling the objectives of the National Technology Initiative in continuity with the previous plan. The new plan's approach underscores a more holistic strategy for technological transformation. It envisions creating a robust economic framework that not only

enhances technological capabilities but also supports sustainable practices, ultimately driving progress across all areas of the economy. It is also important to recognize that local and national technological production is integrated within the framework of *green transformation*, which is to be commercialized effectively on an international scale as the plan's goals.

In parallel with the official embedding of the National Technology Initiative in development plans and a range of other strategic documents, there has been a growing emphasis on establishing the necessary institutional arrangements and integrating key sectors into this broader process. This institutionalization reflects a political strategy to create a powerful governance framework for the implementation of the NTI. In this regard, in the publication by the Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA) dedicated to the National Technology Initiative, the prioritized areas have been defined as Technology-Oriented Industrial Move, National Space Program, Digitalization, and National Artificial Intelligence Strategy as well as TEKNOFEST by former Minister of Industry and Technology Mustafa Varank. He highlights that these strategic areas are crucial both for public engagement and the promotion of the NTI's values.

In addition to these fields, other strategic fields and public institutions also played a pivotal role, within the scope of the NTI's objectives. These include the defense industry, the production of a domestically manufactured car, both local and national industrialization as well as technological domains such as space exploration, satellite development, artificial intelligence, and smart cities. Embedded with this expansive policy framework, these areas have emerged as central pillars of the AKP's broader political and developmental agenda. Moreover, the framework of the NTI extends into cultural and social realms in creating a new generation of technologically advanced citizens, particularly young people framed around the "Teknofest Generation" by AKP's political elites, as well as the creation of a "scientific corpus" of the NTI to legitimize the evolution of this expansive policy agenda. Through the combination of strategic planning, institutional structuring, and the mobilization of key projects and events, the National Technology Initiative has been positioned as a central pillar in Turkey's technological policy landscape (Figure 3.2).

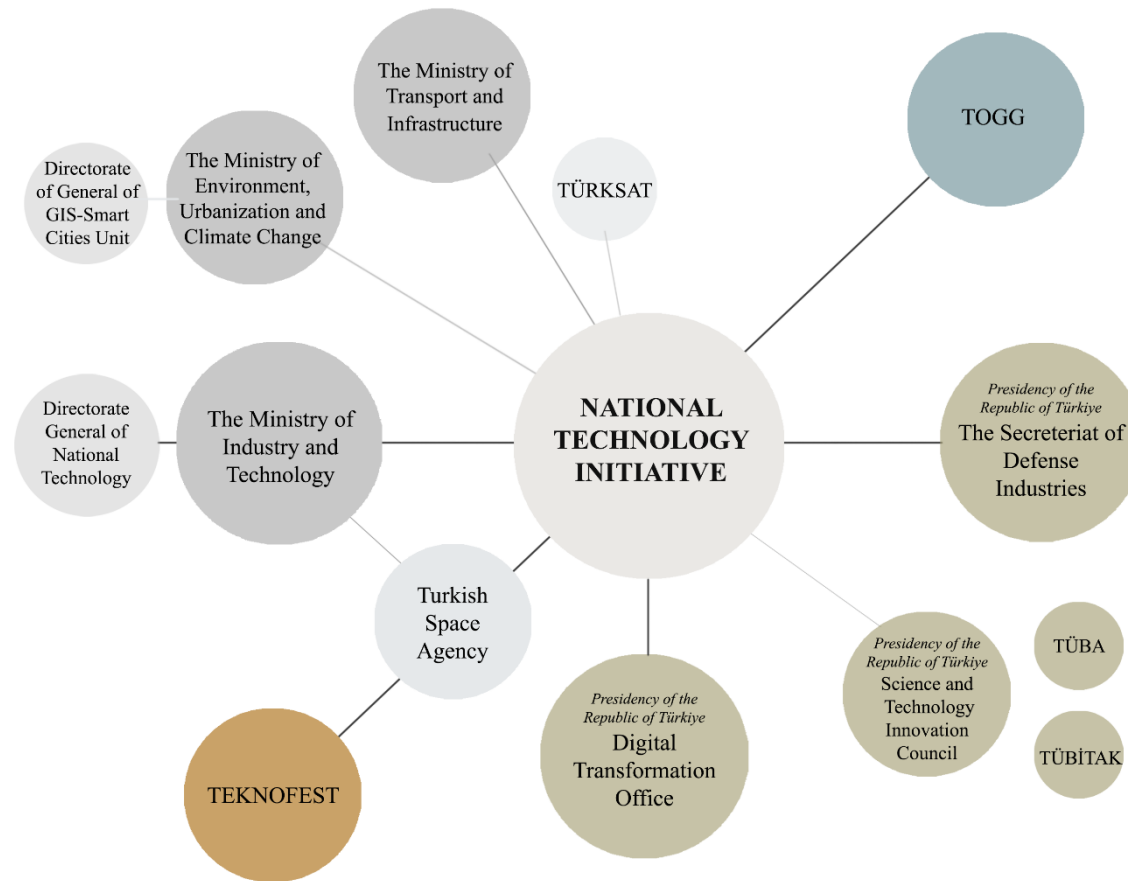


**Figure 3.2.** Timeline for the institutionalization of the National Technology Initiative

These shifts reflect a deliberate strategy to reinforce the regime's control and authority around a policy orientation while power has become increasingly centralized within the presidency. In this context, the National Technology Initiative has evolved into a multi-dimensional policy agenda that spans a wide range of sectors while triggering significant institutional transformations since its promotion beginning in 2018. The technology agenda around the NTI has been reinforced by the promotion of President Erdoğan and other prominent political figures. In this sense, the NTI is framed more than just a strategic plan but as the Turkey's roadmap into being a powerful and fully independent nation on the global context.

The following sub-sections will provide a comprehensive examination of the key strategic public institutions and major fields that play a crucial role in the implementation and promotion of the National Technology Initiative. In this context, the relevant ministries include the Ministry of Industry and Technology which serves as the principal coordinating institution for the NTI, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change which contributes to the NTI's urban and infrastructural dimensions particularly around smart cities, and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure which contributes to the technological modernization as well as the satellite programs.

Additionally, the Turkish Space Agency, which operates as an organization under the Ministry of Industry and Technology, will also be examined for its strategic role in advancing the NTI's ambitions in space exploration. The analysis will also extend to several key institutions operating under the Presidency. These include the Secretariat of Defense Industries which is responsible for the development of defense technology, the Digital Transformation Office which contributes to the digital governance agenda, and the Science and Technology Innovation Council acts as a central institution in supporting research and scientific development. Furthermore, the Aviation, Space, and Technology Festival (TEKNOFEST) which serves as a powerful mechanism in supporting the NTI's public mobilization and the national car production initiative (TOGG) as the symbol of national development and pride will be discussed in the following sub-sections (Figure 3.3).



**Figure 3.3.** Key strategic institutions and fields for the NTI

### **3.3.2.1. Key Strategic Public Institutions**

#### **3.3.2.1.1. The Ministry of Industry and Technology**

The Ministry of Industry and Technology plays a crucial role in realizing the objectives of the National Technology Initiative (NTI), as prominently outlined in the Ministry's strategic documents. Notably, Ministers Mustafa Varank, during his tenure from 2018 to 2023, and Fatih Kacır, who took office in 2023, have emerged as key figures in championing and advancing NTI, significantly contributing to its promotion.

After the declaration of the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan in July 2019, the ministry presents the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy document by launching the roadmap of NTI under the leadership in September 2019:

The '2023 Industry and Technology Strategy,' prepared in line with the 'National Technology Initiative' led by our esteemed President, was shared with the public by our esteemed Minister on 18/09/2019. This strategy outlines the roadmap that Turkey will follow in the fields of industry and technology in the upcoming period. The strategy, which includes the components of the National Technology Initiative, sets forth concrete steps to achieve the goals of the Eleventh Development Plan by strengthening Turkey's technological independence and enhancing value-added production in the industry (p.5).

While the ministry's Strategic Plan (2019-2023) was revised as the Strategic Plan (2020-2024) after the declaration of the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy. The revised plan 2020-2024 is published in April 2020. Even if the first plan is prepared with “the spirit of the NTI”, the emphasis on NTI is enhanced in the revised plan in the overall framework of the strategic plan. In addition, Mustafa Varank and the vice-ministers emphasized that the development roadmap of the country is structured around NTI in their prefaces in both of the strategic plans. However, in the first plan AIM 1 is defined as ‘Elevating our country to a globally competitive position in high technology fields by developing our R&D and innovation capacity’ while NTI is mentioned in AIM 4. In the revised plan, NTI is prioritized in AIM 1 as following ‘To realize the National Technology Initiative by ensuring the technological



transformation of the industry, enhancing innovation and design capacity, and developing a qualified workforce’. The role of the NTI enhances in the ministry’s Strategic Plan of 2024-2028. The NTI emblem is presented on the cover page of the strategic plan. The new minister after 2023 elections, Fatih Kacır, directly asserts the achievements of NTI in the preface. In this strategic plan, AIM 1 is still related with NTI but expanding its goals, in expanding them within the framework of the *Century of Turkey* project of the AKP.



**Figure 3.4.** Strategic plan cover pages and the NTI emblem in the strategic plan (2024-2028)

On the other hand, before the presidential system in 2018, the ministry's strategic plan, to cover the years between 2018 and 2022, underlines the "local" production while the new plan after the presidential system emphasizes the themes of "local and national" together. In addition, in the mission statement of the new plans the phrase "to create a local and national industrial structure" becomes prominent.

While NTI envisaged to disperse to many sectors, the establishment of the Directorate General of National Technology in 2020 under the Ministry of Industry and Technology reflects the importance given to this policy orientation. The Directorate General of National Technology becomes the responsible unit for the aims in the revised plan 2020-2024 while it was Project Management Office in the first plan in 2019-2023. The directorate presents various projects in building the globally leading entrepreneurship ecosystem, launching tech academies, managing open-source platforms as exemplified by in the following projects: Technology and Innovation Fund, National Technology Entrepreneurship Strategy, National Technology and Techno-Entrepreneurship Awards, Google Play and App Academy, Turkey Open-Source Platform, Cybersecurity Awareness Trainings.

One of these projects is TEKNOFEST which is organized in collaboration with Turkish Technology Team (T3) Foundation. The general manager of the Directorate General of National Technology Alper Güzel is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the T3 Foundation. The Ministry of Science and Technology gives specific importance to TEKNOFEST, mentioned in the strategic document of 2020-2024 and 2024-2028 as well as a key field for the NTI since the period of Mustafa Varank. In addition, for the implementation of R&D strategies and increasing the technology entrepreneurship, Terminal İstanbul<sup>28</sup> is recently presented as an important project by the ministry, which presented as following in the ministry's website: "With the Terminal İstanbul project, our İstanbul Atatürk Airport will now become the flagship of our country's digital transformation and technological development as the largest techno-park in our nation."

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<sup>28</sup> [TERMİNAL İSTANBUL PROJESİ TANITIM TOPLANTISI - Haberler - T.C. Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanlığı \(uab.gov.tr\) Haber | T.C. Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanlığı](https://www.terminalistanbul.com.tr/)



**Figure 3.5.** Terminal İstanbul opening (Derived from Sabah web-site<sup>29</sup>)

On the other hand, the *Technology-Oriented Industrial Move* is a significant initiative by the ministry, aiming to enhance national production within the industrial sector under this policy framework. This initiative underscores the importance of boosting domestic manufacturing capabilities. The groundwork for this policy was laid with the 'Milat 2018 Project,' which was featured in the AKP's 2018 election manifesto.

The project was presented as a key milestone in achieving a technologically advanced, self-sufficient industrial landscape in the election manifesto as following: “With the Milat 2018 Project, which consists of projects and programs that will strengthen the national and domestic identity of the Turkish industrial revolution, contribute to its technological transformation, steadily increase the share of high-tech products in our exports, and reduce our current account deficit, we will initiate great leaps in science, technology, and industry” (p.353). This preliminary project has since been reorganized and integrated within the broader framework of the National Technology Initiative. This reorganization reflects a strategic alignment with the NTI's goals, emphasizing the development of a robust, technology-driven industrial sector that prioritizes national production and innovation.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/terminal-istanbul-ile-turkiye-girisimciligin-vitrini-olacak-6867684>

### 3.3.2.1.2. Turkish Space Agency

The Turkish Space Agency (TUA), established in 2018 by an official decree, is a public institution affiliated with the Ministry of Industry and Technology. The agency's establishment underscores a significant expansion within the scope of the National Technology Initiative. According to the 12th Development Plan, a key objective of the agency is to enhance the country's technological proficiency in space, particularly through projects such as the Moon Research Project and the development of indigenous satellites.

The National Space Program Strategy 2022-2026 is published in 2022 ‘to propel the NTI forward and bolster Turkey's position as a "strong and influential" nation both regionally and globally through strategic alliances and collaborations in space technologies’ as stated in the Chapter 22 TÜBA publication dedicated to the NTI. Within this scope, the first Turkish astronaut was sent to the International Space Station, an achievement that was widely celebrated and highlighted in 2024. Recently, the National Space Program Strategy Document 2022-2030 is presented to further advance the agency’s operations.



**Figure 3.6.** Turkish Space Agency poster with the NTI emblem introducing first Turkish astronaut (Derived from agency’s website)

### 3.3.2.1.3. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure

The Republic of Turkey's Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure is dedicated to developing and maintaining the transport systems, including roads, railways, airways, and maritime routes, as well as enhancing communication infrastructure. It also plays a crucial role in advancing Turkey's technological capabilities in transport and infrastructure projects. Particularly in the field of communication, the objectives of the ministry highlight Turkey's advancements in satellite technology, earth observation, and space exploration. The ministry oversees the development, launch, and management of satellites to enhance national security, economic growth, and technological innovation, emphasizing their role in communication. Turkey's satellite projects aim to increase self-reliance in space technologies and expand the country's presence in the global space industry.

The main institution driving these aims is Türksat Satellite Communication Cable TV and Operations, a private company wholly owned by the Türkiye Wealth Fund, with President Erdoğan serving as the Chairman of the Board since September 12, 2018. Recently, Turkey's first domestically produced communication satellite, TÜRKSAT 6A, was launched on July 9, 2024, from Cape Canaveral, Florida, using a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket by the ministry in collaboration with Türksat.<sup>30</sup>

In his message about the launch, Erdoğan emphasized the satellite's domestic and national communication character, highlighting that over 81% of it was produced with national resources.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz highlighted that "TÜRKSAT 6A is a product of our National Technology Initiative, the expertise of our engineers, and the know-how gained by our defense industry. It is the highest value technology project that our country has produced to date."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.uab.gov.tr/haberler/uzaya-imzamizi-atiyoruz-turksat-6a-yi-bu-gece-uzaya-firlatiyoruz>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turksat-6a-uydusunun-firlatilmasi-torenine-video-mesaj-gonderdi>

<sup>32</sup> <https://tubitak.gov.tr/tr/haber/ilk-yerli-ve-milli-haberlesme-uydumuz-turksat-6a-uzaya-firlatildi>





**Figure 3 7. Türksat 6A poster**<sup>33</sup>

The launch of the satellite has sparked widespread celebration on social media, under the hashtag "Turkish Footprint in Space". This phrase captures the pride and significance of Turkey's growing presence in space, symbolizing a milestone in the nation's technological and scientific advancements.

#### **3.3.2.1.4. The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change**

The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change plays a pivotal role in shaping urban development. It also serves as a key institution for national climate change strategies aligning with international environmental commitments. In 2021, the ministry expanded its mandate by incorporating climate change into its name and responsibilities, signaling Turkey's commitment to addressing the global climate crisis. This expansion includes the creation of a climate change presidency. These efforts are aligned with Turkey's broader goals, such as achieving net-zero emissions by 2053 and promoting green development across all sectors.

<sup>33</sup> <https://x.com/turksat/status/1812122148011430306>

Furthermore, the ministry is responsible for advancing smart city policies. Following the declaration of the 11th Development Plan (2019-2023), the ministry introduced the National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2023, which serves as a comprehensive roadmap for integrating digital technologies, data-driven governance as well as smart urban development strategies. As part of this agenda, the "Smart Cities and Municipalities Congress and Exhibition," held under the auspices of the Turkish Presidency and hosted by the Union of Municipalities of Turkey, was inaugurated with speeches from key figures, including President Erdoğan. The event aimed to accelerate the transition to smart cities in Turkey by bringing together leaders and experts in the field while highlighting the commitment to develop smart cities as a pillar of Turkey's development. In this regard, the congress also emphasized Turkey's agenda to integrate smart city strategies into urban development, highlighted by the introduction of the 2020-2023 National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan.<sup>34</sup> Recently, the draft for the upgraded strategy document, titled the "National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2030," has been published by the ministry. This strategic plan outlines Turkey's continued commitment to advancing smart city initiatives across the country with local and national production within broader goals of technological self-sufficiency and domestic innovation.

#### **3.3.2.1.5. The Secretariat of Defense Industries**

With the transition to the Presidential System in 2018, the defense industry was brought under the control of the president. One of the most important changes is the affiliation of The Undersecretariat for Defense Industries (SSM) to the Presidency of Republic in December 2017 and the institution is renamed as the Secretariat of Defense Industries (SSB) in July 2018. SSM was founded in 1985 under the Ministry of National Defense. Until 2018, it remained under the Ministry of National Defense, with the Defense Industry Executive Committee (SSİK), which serves as the decision-making body of the system, comprising the Prime Minister, the Chief of General Staff, and the Minister of National Defense. After 2018, Defense Industry

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<sup>34</sup> <https://cbs.csb.gov.tr/akilli-sehirler-ve-belediyeler-kongre-ve-sergisine-katildik.-haber-253873>

Executive Committee (SSIK), organizes under the chairmanship of the President and includes the Vice President, Minister of Treasury and Finance, Minister of Interior, Minister of National Defense, Minister of Industry and Technology, Chief of General Staff, and the President of Defense Industries.<sup>35</sup> This institutional restructuring parallels to the broader shift in civil-military relations in Turkey under the AKP governments, particularly the loss of control and influence by the Turkish Armed Forces in the rivalry with AKP. The AKP consolidated its power over key strategic sectors such as defense industry through institutional changes. Particularly, the president becomes the decision-making mechanism in the defense industry decisions within the framework of the executive centralization experienced during the establishment of the authoritarian regime in Turkey,

The institution prepared "The Secretariat of Defense Industries Strategic Plan 2019-2023" and "The Secretariat of Defense Industries Strategic Plan 2024-2028" within the context of the Presidential Government System. Prof. Dr. Haluk Görgün, the former executive of ASELSAN, was appointed to the Presidency of Defense Industries, taking over the position from İsmail Demir in 2023 by stating that they will continue to achieve progress toward the objective of the National Technology Initiative: "Under the leadership of our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, our defense industry has made great strides in recent years. We will continue to bring the successes of our advancing defense industry to the world, in collaboration with friendly and allied countries, within the framework of mutual benefit."<sup>36</sup>

### **3.3.2.1.6. The Science and Technology Innovation Council**

With the transition to the Presidential Government System, significant institutional changes were also introduced to centralize the control of the science and technology policies. In this regard, "Supreme Council for Science and Technology (*Bilim ve Teknoloji Yüksek Kurulu (BTYK)*)" under TÜBİTAK was dissolved<sup>37</sup> and its functions

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.ssb.gov.tr/WebSite/contentlist.aspx?PageID=40&LangID=1>

<sup>36</sup> [Savunma Sanayii Başkanı Haluk Görgün, Görevini İsmail Demir'den Devraldı | TeknoHAB Teknoloji Geliştirme Bölgesi](#)

<sup>37</sup> [BTYK | TÜBİTAK | Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu \(tubitak.gov.tr\)](#)



were integrated in “The Science and Technology Innovation Council (*Bilim ve Teknoloji Yenilik Kurulu,*)” under the presidency. The functions of the BTYK were transferred to the newly established council. This change signifies a restructuring aimed at enhancing the strategic coordination of science and technology initiatives directly under the Presidential Government System. By integrating BTYK's responsibilities under the agency of the presidency, it is aimed to control decision-making processes and reinforce the alignment of scientific and technological policies with national strategic goals of the NTI.

In parallel, institutions such as TÜBA (Turkish Academy of Sciences) and TÜBİTAK (Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) have gained important roles. TÜBİTAK, in particular, has embraced the "National Technology Initiative" as its guiding vision<sup>38</sup>, underscoring its commitment to advancing Turkey's technological capabilities and self-sufficiency. Through expanded funding mechanisms and its closer integration with the goals of the NTI, TÜBİTAK functions as a both dominant institution in scientific research and the realization of the new regime's technology narrative.

#### **3.3.2.1.7. Digital Transformation Office**

In 2018, Digital Transformation Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye was established by Presidential Decree No. 1 to consolidate and coordinate a wide range of initiatives related to digital transformation, cyber security, national technologies, big data, and artificial intelligence. Positioned directly under the authority of the presidency, the office was designed to centralize the digital policy and strategic alignment with the objectives of the National Technology Initiative.

According to the institution's official website, this consolidation is framed as a response to technological advancements, evolving societal needs, and the reform trends in the public sector. In this regard, The Digital Transformation Office plays a pivotal role in shaping the policy framework of “Digital Turkey,” one of the cornerstones of the country's broader technological vision, aligned with the National

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<sup>38</sup> [TÜBİTAK'ın parolası Milli teknoloji hamlesi - Güncel Haberler \(hurriyet.com.tr\)](https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/tubitak-in-parolası-milli-teknoloji-hamlesi-güncel-haberler)

Technology Initiative. The stated objective of the institution is to integrate digital technologies across various sectors, by ensuring the country stays competitive in an increasingly digital world. Additionally, the establishment of techno-parks, which bring together startups to foster development, is crucial for advancing the objectives of the NTI around digital technology. The initiatives and startups for digital technologies are supported by the Digital Transformation Office in collaboration with the Ministry of Industry and Technology.

### **3.3.2.2. Other Important Fields for the National Technology Initiative**

#### **3.3.2.2.1. Teknofest: The Aviation, Space, and Technology Festival**

One of the most prominent platforms for promoting the National Technology Initiative is Teknofest, the Aviation, Space, and Technology Festival held annually since 2018. Organized by Turkish Technology Team (T3) Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of Industry and Technology, Teknofest serves as a high-profile event aimed at fostering public engagement, showcasing domestic technological achievements, and particularly inspiring youth participation in technological advancements around the framework of the NTI. The official objective of the festival is to increase young people's interest in technology and contribute to Turkey's development in the field of technology by bringing together technology entrepreneurs, researchers, and industrialists. Held in different cities each year, Teknofest attracts great interest and hosts a wide range of participants. In the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy of The Ministry of Industry and Technology, Teknofest is mentioned as follows:

Organized with the motto 'Technology-Producing, Strong Turkey,' Teknofest succeeded in becoming the world's second-largest aviation festival in terms of visitor numbers in its first year. It is an umbrella organization conducted with the aim of socializing the National Technology Initiative (p.21).

In addition, the festival is supported by AKP's political actors as well as the President Erdoğan to promote and reinforce its role within the broader framework of the NTI. Their participation gives political legitimacy to the event by positioning it as a key instrument in advancing the regime's populist agenda.



**Figure 3.8.** Teknofest 2023 in Ankara (Derived from Kosgeb web-site<sup>39</sup>)

In his 2023 speech at Teknofest in Ankara, Erdoğan highlighted the festival's origins and its significance as a cornerstone of the NTI. He underscored Teknofest's role in showcasing Turkey's technological advancements and inspiring the youth:

“We are truly delighted by the growing interest in TEKNOFEST, where the number of participants and visitors has increased exponentially each year, because TEKNOFEST is like my own child. Six years ago, in 2017, I had the joy of holding my granddaughter Aybuke in one arm and TEKNOFEST, then in its conceptual stages, in the other. I have personally witnessed the growth, flourishing, and development of this wonderful festival, which has become a symbol of both my granddaughter and the national technology initiative. I learned that 1 million young people, from primary school to doctoral level, applied to the 2023 TEKNOFEST, which is a significant milestone for our country and nation. This, indeed, is a reflection of the Turkish century.”<sup>40</sup>

In this regard, Selçuk Bayraktar, Baykar’s Technology Leader and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Turkey Technology Team (T3) Foundation, is a prominent advocate of the National Technology Initiative. He plays a key role in supporting and promoting the initiative, particularly through his involvement in Teknofest, where he is affectionately known as the “older brother of Teknofest youth,” symbolizing his mentorship and influence on the next generation of Turkish innovators. Teknofest is crucial for the social mobilization of the National Technology Initiative for the AKP. In addition, the embodiment of the festival by the President Erdoğan is crucial to further enhance the festival’s importance. His participation to the event elevates the

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.kosgeb.gov.tr/site/tr/genel/detay/8903/ankarada-teknofest-coskusu#prettyPhoto>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/149249/teknofest-i-ziyaretlerinde-yaptiklari-konusma>

festival's visibility while reinforcing the narrative of technologically advanced and nationally unified Turkey under his leadership.



**Figure 3.9.** President Erdoğan in Teknofest Adana in 2024 (Derived from Teknofest web-site<sup>41</sup>)

#### **3.3.2.2.2. The Initiation of National Car Production: TOGG**

Turkey's Automobile Joint Venture Group (TOGG) was established on June 25, 2018, under the leadership of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) and includes prominent Turkish companies such as Anadolu Group, BMC, Kök Group, Turkcell, and Zorlu. TOGG's mission is to create a globally competitive mobility brand with intellectual and industrial property rights fully owned by Turkey. Mass production of its first electric vehicle began at the Gemlik TOGG Technology Campus in 2022, with President Erdoğan leading the national car's public debut.

The production of Turkey's national car is a key component of the country's broader National Technology Initiative. It embodies the state's strategic focus to enhance self-sufficiency and global competitiveness in technological advancements. Beyond its function as an electric vehicle, TOGG is framed as a symbol of national innovation as well as national pride.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.teknofest.org/en/gallery/images/>



**Figure 3.10.** The launch of TOGG (Derived from Kosgeb web-site<sup>42</sup>)

In Chapter 16 of the TÜBA publication dedicated to the NTI, Gürcan Karakaş articulates this vision, stating that "TOGG is more than just a car." He highlights the importance of owning intellectual and industrial property rights, stating, "Authenticity and nationality mean that these rights are entirely owned by us, which makes us independent and free" (p.318). This emphasis aligns with the broader technology narrative of the NTI in terms of national sovereignty and dependence in technological advancements.

Building upon the discussion of institutionalization dynamics presented in this section, the next chapter will examine the National Technology Initiative (NTI) through the analytical lens developed in Chapter 2 around the themes of developmentalism, strong leadership, international reputation, and dissemination to everyday life. Through this lens, the next chapter will explore how the NTI functions not only as a comprehensive policy framework aimed at advancing Turkey's technological capabilities, but also as a populist strategy. Particularly, it will investigate how the NTI is employed to mobilize public support, foster a sense of national pride, and eventually contribute to legitimizing the new regime in Turkey. In this regard, the chapter will highlight the ways in which the NTI plays a critical role in sustaining the ruling AKP's hold on power, by framing technological advancement as an embodiment of their leadership to build the Turkey's future. This

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-yerli-otomobil-toggun-direksiyonunda-yolun-acik-olsun-tekerine-tas-degmesin-togg,pQKsGKRkbU6Zfhs6S5Si8A>

analysis aims to reveal the entanglement between technology discourse, policy, populist strategies, and authoritarian regime consolidation in the contemporary Turkish political context.



## CHAPTER 4

### NATIONAL TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE AS AN AUTHORITARIAN POPULIST STRATEGY

This chapter will examine the National Technology Initiative (NTI) as an authoritarian populist strategy of the AKP under the leadership of President Erdoğan. Building on the multi-scalar strategies formulated in Chapter 2, which were developed through the analysis of global cases, this chapter will analyze the Turkish case through its engagement with technology focusing on four interrelated dimensions: (i) *developmentalism*, (ii) *strong leadership*, (iii) *international reputation*, and (iv) *dissemination into everyday life*.

#### 4.1. Developmentalism

This theme aims to shed light on how the developmental agenda around technology opens a major field for populist strategy to boost and sustain the new regime. This strategy within the confines of the developmental agenda is elaborated in two axes:

- (i) how growth, prosperity, and welfare is promised,
- (ii) how the will and aspirations of the nation are framed.

The first axis of disseminating the developmental agenda at the national scale encompasses *material dimension* centered on economic growth, national prosperity, and social welfare. Whereas the populist strategy around the NTI also includes *symbolic dimension* to be fulfilled, which are articulated in the second axis. This symbolic dimension enriches the discursive framework of technology narrative by addressing the nation's will and aspirations, while redefining/reinventing of these aspirations as envisioned by the political authority, often invoking historical references.



#### 4.1.1. Promising Growth, Prosperity, and Welfare

One of the most prominently articulated objectives within the developmental agenda on technology is the promise of growth, welfare, and prosperity in the political narrative of the AKP and President Erdoğan. Both technology and science are viewed as essential for Turkey to achieve its developmental goals, a point underscored by President Erdoğan in his speech at the 2022 TÜBİTAK and TÜBA award ceremony. In the speech, he explicitly asserts that economic growth and prosperity will be realized through the roadmap of National Technology Initiative (NTI), while also highlighting the aim of positioning Turkey among the world's leading economies:

“Our country is steadily approaching the goal of becoming one of the world's top 10 economies through the efforts guided by our National Technology Initiative. We sincerely believe that political independence is achieved through technological independence. We view science and technology as the most important tools and the most effective means for Turkey to achieve its goals. The path to value-added production, strong growth, and sustainable prosperity lies in the vitality of the scientific ecosystem.”<sup>43</sup>

Within the same line, Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz also states that technological advancement does not only mean to produce innovation, but also constructing a new ‘development mechanism’, particularly including all segments of society in this transformation. He emphasizes that the National Technology Initiative aims to establish this mechanism by securing the future of Turkey.<sup>44</sup> This rhetoric on inclusivity represents that technology policy is not a technical and economic endeavor, but it is a socio-political project within the framework of the NTI. In this regard, the NTI is positioned as a tool for social cohesion and shared vision. Vice President also states that domestic production is key for national prosperity and the NTI is embraced as a state policy under the leadership of President Erdoğan, in his speech at the event title “Turkey’s Quantum Age Begins: Launch Ceremony of Turkey’s First Quantum Computer” held at the TOBB university technology center.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/142328/tubitak-ve-tuba-odulleri-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-yilmaz-milli-teknoloji-hamlesi-yarinarimizi-da-guvence-altina-almayi-hedeflemektedir/3400008>



The emphasis on new development mechanism, inclusivity of all segments for national prosperity, and the NTI as a state policy for technologically advanced future is recurring themes in constructing the discursive framework of the technology-based populist strategy of the new regime.

In addition, to expand populist maneuvers while promoting development along the axis of technological transformation, President Erdoğan often emphasizes how Turkey was ‘underdeveloped’ before the AKP came to power in 2002. The narrative of overcoming underdevelopment has become a key rhetorical strategy for Erdoğan to strengthen his connection with the AKP's electoral base, as both the party and its leader are credited with making significant developmental progress. Erdoğan consistently employs the concept of underdevelopment in his public speeches, particularly when discussing growth, welfare, and prosperity through high-tech production since the declaration of the NTI roadmap of, as exemplified in his opening speech in Teknofest 2019:

“But unfortunately, when we took over the country's administration 17 years ago, Turkey was still chained by underdevelopment. First, we rolled up our sleeves to solve the infrastructure problems of our 81 provinces and to provide our people with the services they longed for. Alongside this, we engaged in a tough struggle against guardianship, strengthened our democracy, and reinforced the supremacy of the national will.”<sup>45</sup>

In this context, Erdoğan not only underscores how underdeveloped the country was before them but also emphasizes that their achievements in infrastructure and technological development have well exceeded those made throughout the entire history of the Republic.<sup>46</sup> Echoing Erdoğan's emphasis on underdevelopment, Selçuk Bayraktar—a key figure in the defense industry and one of the organizers of Teknofest—underscores the importance of a strong regime for achieving success in high technology. He notes that Turkey was a pioneer in aviation during the early years of the Republic but later fell behind in this field. Selçuk Bayraktar emphasizes that Turkey has overcome what he frames as ‘learned helplessness’, a historically

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<sup>45</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : Teknofest'i Ziyaretlerinde Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr/medya/1444)

<sup>46</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : “Geleceğini Planlamayan Milletler, Başkalarının Planlarının Parçası Olmaya Mahkûmdur” \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr/medya/1444)

contingent sense of technological dependency and inferiority, and is now ready to take an active role in shaping its future within the framework of emerging global paradigm shift, as reflected in the following statement:

"We live in a world where the strong prevail. If we want our voice to be heard loudly, we must be strong. It's very difficult to catch up when you enter the race from behind. Currently, the biggest transformational wave in the world is happening in high technology. Those who are driving this transformational wave are aware of the critical importance of nations' technological development capabilities for their survival. This is a paradigm shift."<sup>47</sup>

The above statement reflects a broader narrative of national self-empowerment AND overcoming 'underdevelopment' through the developmental agenda of the NTI.

Building on the rhetoric of underdevelopment and the efforts to overcome it, the Presidential Government System (PGS) is portrayed as the most critical next step in the political propaganda of the new governing model. From the very beginning, the presidential system has been framed as essential to actualize the technology-driven developmental agenda and enabling Turkey to flourish, as highlighted in the AKP's 2018 election manifesto:

"Our country will make its political stability permanent with the new governance system. On the basis of political stability, economic stability will further strengthen, and a fast and effective management approach will be implemented. Thus, we will have the opportunity to achieve our goals for 2023 and beyond much more easily. As we approach the June 24 elections, we draw all our strength, as always, from our nation, and with the blessings of our people, we aim to open the curtain on a new era. Turkey cannot afford to waste time. With our new governance system, it is time to make a much stronger leap in our economic growth and social welfare increase" (p.8).

As this statement suggests, the political stability and effective management provided by the presidential system will pave the way for a new era of growth, welfare, and prosperity. To achieve this goal, high-tech transformation is emphasized as a crucial element, as promoted in the overall framework of the election manifesto. In this

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/sirkethaberleri/vakif-dernek/selcuk-bayraktar-milli-teknoloji-hamlesi-programinda-aciklamalarda-bulundu/671288#:~:text='Milli%20Teknoloji%20Hamlesi%2C%20T%C3%BCrkiye',ve%20nitelikli%20i%C5%9F%20g%C3%BCc%C3%BCne%20sahibiz.>

regard, the 2018 election manifesto highlights two interrelated dimensions: the critical role of the presidential system in fostering growth, prosperity, and stability, and the central importance of technology in achieving these objectives. Within the objective of the high-tech transformation, the beginning of NTI is announced, with a vision to enhance national capabilities across various industries, particularly in the defense sector, to further drive national production and growth. Moreover, the vision for the future is centered on technological transformation, which is expected to impact education, security, health, and public administration around the concept of national technology.

Although the election manifesto only mentions the launch of the NTI, defense industry projects are highlighted as crucial development initiatives in setting examples and later consistently promoted as symbols of the NTI. For instance, ALTAY Main Battle Tank Project, National Ship (MİLGEM) Project, New Type Submarine Project, National Combat Aircraft Project, HÜRKUŞ Aircraft Project, Anka UAV Project, Bayraktar UAV Project, Akıncı UAV / Unmanned Combat Aircraft Project, Atak Attack and Tactical Reconnaissance Helicopter Project, General Purpose Helicopter Project, Original Helicopter Project are extensively promoted in the 2018 election manifesto of AKP. In addition, development projects in education, health, and energy are mentioned while transportation projects hold a significant role in terms of development and growth with highway projects, tunnels, railways, high-speed trains. The initiation of national car production as Turkey's Automobile Project is also highlighted in the manifesto as one of the significant development projects. In promoting these achievements, the AKP's political propaganda underscores the significance of technological transformation as a central pillar of their governance strategy. This approach reflects a vision for the country's growth and modernization, with the National Technology Initiative (NTI) serving as the strategic roadmap and the presidential system facilitates its implementation.

After the AKP's victory in the 2018 elections, and the AKP leader Erdoğan became the first president under the new governing system, the political agenda outlined in the AKP's 2018 election manifesto was translated into official government policy with the release of the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan in July 2019. This developmental

agenda, designed to transform the economy and ensure long-term stability and sustainability, is structured around the roadmap of the National Technology Initiative (NTI). The development plan's objectives aim to enhance productivity in all sectors of our country's economy and growth, and promote international competitiveness through NTI, as stated in the fifth note of the plan's introduction:

"The Eleventh Development Plan envisions an economic and social development process for our country that increases productivity in all areas and enhances international competitiveness through the National Technology Initiative. The plan adopts the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms protected and developed by a strong democracy, as the main pillars of the development effort. It prioritizes stability and sustainability in the economy, an increase in welfare and fair distribution in the areas of human, social, and spatial development, and a continuous trend of development as primary objectives" (p.1).

Wide range of areas are mentioned in the development plan to realize the NTI in the country by preparing strategic documents in key fields such as "artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, augmented reality, big data, cybersecurity, energy storage, advanced materials, robotics, micro/nano/opto-electronics, biotechnology, quantum technologies, sensor technologies, and additive manufacturing technologies" (Strategy and Budget Office (SBB), 2019, p.79). The defense industry still holds a significant role within the framework of NTI to accelerate the high-tech transformation (SBB, 2019, p.94).

In addition to establishing the narrative on technology through strategic policy documents, Erdoğan also advocated for this new development trajectory in his public statements. In his speech at the introduction meeting for the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan in February 2019, he highlights that the development model they employed has been instrumental in tripling the level of living over a span of 15 years and in ensuring a more equitable distribution of income.<sup>48</sup> He asserts in his speech that the need for high-technology production and transformation is fundamental to sustain and enhance this development agenda. He also remarks that the growth and prosperity of the country will increase within the framework of 11<sup>th</sup> development plan: "We are

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<sup>48</sup> [AK PARTİ | Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, '11. Kalkınma Planı Tanıtım Toplantısı'nda konuştu \(akparti.org.tr\)](https://www.akparti.org.tr)

determined to realize our economic and technological breakthroughs in a way that will transform this potential into new investment opportunities. Only in this way can we make our country a regional attraction center in energy, transportation, logistics, and trade".<sup>49</sup> Erdoğan also addresses one of the criticisms in the same meeting by highlighting the importance of both infrastructural projects and the technological achievements planning to be made in the period of the new plan:

"Last night, a professor said something on a TV channel that you wouldn't believe; 'Building bridges, building dams, building airports won't solve the issue; tell us how much onions and potatoes cost.' Imagine, you have no dams, no airports, no TOGG, no aircraft carrier, and they're saying, 'Tell us the price of tomatoes and potatoes'... This man is a professor... What a disgrace.... Firstly, what does this nation gain from your professorship? You're absent in education, absent in health, absent in transportation, absent in justice, absent in security... And what is it, tomatoes, potatoes? Poor thing, poor thing. Without these, you won't have tomatoes or potatoes either."<sup>50</sup>

As this statement reveals Erdoğan and the official policy orientation of AKP prioritizes the long-term prosperity and national development while the ‘enemies’ of the nation simplify such matters by concerning the immediate economic struggles of citizens and material well-being of them. This approach is the reason for the country’s underdevelopment before AKP’s tenure as constantly emphasized by Erdoğan. In this sense, the contrast employed in his statement reveals an often-applied populist maneuver by the president to invite criticism. On the other hand, in a speech delivered in 2023, Erdoğan stated the importance given by them to the issue of the immediate well-being of the citizens while simultaneously criticizing the opposition leader of Republican People’s Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, within the same framework of simplifying matters:

"Be assured: We value TOGG, our Anadolu ship, our Kızılelma unmanned aircraft, and our İMECE satellite just as much as we value the onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers at the market, the meat at the butcher, and the milk at the grocery store. However, unlike others, we do not see these as separate

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<sup>49</sup> T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : “Geleceğini Planlamayan Milletler, Başkalarının Planlarının Parçası Olmaya Mahkûmdur” (tcgb.gov.tr)

<sup>50</sup> [Erdoğan, AKP'nin seçim beyannamesini açıkladı; yıllardır yapamadıklarını vaat diye anlattı - Evrensel](#)

issues. Anyone who says they will give you bread or money without addressing these things is lying. One such person is 'Bay Bay Kemal,' whose life is full of lies."<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, based on the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy is declared in September 2019 by the Ministry of Industry and Technology. This strategic document is essential in terms of establishing the trajectory of the development through NTI for economic growth and prosperity. Mustafa Varank, the former Minister of Industry and Technology, remarks in the introduction text of the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy that the next phase of economic growth will be drawn by the guidance of the NTI by stating:

“It's time to elevate Turkey to the next level and place it among the world's most advanced economies. The core of this new success story will be formed by the industrial and technological policies we will develop under the guidance of the National Technology Breakthrough” (p.3).

Erdoğan also highlights the vision of this strategic document, which was prepared with the essence of NTI, to emphasize the objectives to become the producer of new technologies and drawing the path of future economic policies in one of his speeches:

"Last week, our 2023 industry and technology strategy was shared with the public. This strategy was prepared with the spirit of the National Technology Initiative. In the technological transformation process, we want to be the producer of new technologies, not just the market for them."<sup>52</sup>

In 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy document, it is highlighted that NTI prioritizes domestic and national advancements as crucial for development and safeguarding national interests:

"Twelve Main Objectives have been identified in the fields of Industry and Technology to realize the National Technology Initiative. Achieving these objectives will trigger development not only in industry and technology but also in all areas necessary for a comprehensive advancement, ensuring the holistic development of our country" (p.26).

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<sup>51</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/145861/akyazi-recep-tayyip-erdogan-spor-kompleksi-acilis-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>52</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/109733/teknofest-i-ziyaretlerinde-yaptiklari-konusma>

Within the framework the of NTI and its associated policy domains, holistic development emerges as a foundational area to promote the state-led technology policies since this overarching vision will transform the economic structure, place the country as a producer in the technology field, enhance prosperity and built the future of Turkey in a long-term period. In this context, despite the economic crisis that unfolded in Turkey between 2018 and 2023 period and the growing criticisms against the political authority, such critiques tried to be evaded by framing them as short-sided and the enemies of the national development. This strategy of deflecting criticisms is significant in defending the new regime around the promotion of the NTI by the political actors of the AKP. In one of the recent statements, Fatih Kacır, the Minister of Industry and Technology, addresses the criticisms of business associations by calling them to support the National Technology Initiative rather than criticizing the political authority as follows:

“Let me remind them of this reality: Turkey is no longer the old Turkey. We are no longer a country content with assembly-based industry. Today, we have R&D, value-added production, and a Turkey that develops indigenous and national technology. There is no longer room in this country for a political climate in which certain actors exercise tutelage over national will. No one should attempt to spread pessimism about Turkey. The future of Turkey is bright. We are carrying out a production revolution in Anatolia. The number of factories in production within Organized Industrial Zones has increased from 11,000 to 59,000, and the number of employees from 415,000 to 2.7 million. With exports reaching \$263 billion, Turkey has doubled its share in global trade. Over the past 22 years, Turkey has received \$270 billion in foreign direct investment, increasing its share fivefold. Our R&D human capital has grown from 29,000 to 291,000, and our R&D expenditure has risen from \$1.2 billion to \$16 billion. In our technoparks, 11,000 technology enterprises are working with a focus on innovation. Instead of pointing fingers at politicians elected by the will of the people, business associations should support the National Technology Initiative—whose echo is heard on the other side of the world.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, since the declaration of NTI, all the strategic documents reference the ‘vision, spirit, roadmap’ by ensuring economic growth and development. Other important official documents for these objectives are the strategic plans of the Ministry of Industry and Technology. Following the declaration of 2023 Industry and

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/bakan-kacir-turkiye-eski-turkiye-degil/3482151>

Technology Strategy by presenting the roadmap of NTI, the ministry publishes its strategic plan of 2019-2023 and then revising it as the strategic plan of 2020-2024 further enhancing the emphasis on NTI in the revised second plan.

In the stated objectives of the plans, enhancing economic growth through the promotion of a culture that encourages creativity and technological progress, to cultivating a trained and knowledgeable workforce, which is essential for sustainable economic growth, becomes prominent. In addition, emphasizing the creation of an open-source software ecosystem and the expansion of the software developer workforce is envisaged to improve the tech industry's ability to innovate, lower expenses, and enhance competitiveness. These objectives aim to update conventional industries, enhance productivity, and generate fresh business prospects. As a result, they contribute to economic expansion and bolster the overall competitiveness of the economy while enhancing the nation's global competitiveness in high technology sectors. The newly established Directorate General of National Technology under the Ministry of Industry and Technology in 2020 becomes the responsible institution for fulfilling the objectives of the strategic plan of the ministry.

Moreover, the narrative built on the path to economic growth and prosperity based on technological transformation in the new era, as defined since 2018, scales up in the AKP's 2023 election manifesto with the policy direction framed as "Century of Türkiye". During the 2023 election campaign and following the elections, the framework of *Century of Türkiye* emerges and prospers while embedding and contextualizing the technology narrative on a broader scale. As in the following statement of Erdoğan, "*National Technology Initiative*" is seen as the predecessor of "*Century of Türkiye*":

"Thanks to our unwavering commitment to our National Technology Initiative, regardless of the circumstances, today we find ourselves discussing the Turkish Century. We are determined to realize our vision of the Turkish Century in productivity and technology, whose importance is increasingly recognized in the world of the future."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-milli-teknoloji-hamlemiz-sayesinde-turkiye-yuzyilini-konusabilir-hale-geldik/2804419>



In parallel with the flourishing of the narrative of *Century of Türkiye*, fulfilling NTI is defined as one of the major objectives in the new period as framed in the following statement in the AKP's 2023 election manifesto: "In line with our vision of a Turkey whose competitive edge comes from its technological superiority, and whose technological superiority is derived from the Teknofest generation that has been using and internalizing technology from an early age, our fundamental goal is to implement the National Technology Initiative" (p.272).

On the other hand, achievements of technological transformation in the 2018-2023 period are highlighted as in the field of digitalization thanks to NTI in the 2023 election manifesto:

"During our administrations, we have made digitalization a priority policy area to protect the welfare of our citizens and our competitiveness in every field. With the vision of the National Technology Initiative and Digital Turkey, we prioritized the development of local and national innovative technologies, the support of national software, and the protection of critical infrastructure, giving special importance to e-government and cybersecurity" (p.263).

The achievements in this period are also framed by emphasizing the importance of the presidential system for fulfilling such objectives. For instance, the establishment of Digital Transformation office "in line with the result-oriented and efficient management structure of the Presidential Government System" is promoted in terms of gathering the coordination of digital transformation, cybersecurity, big data, artificial intelligence, and other innovative technologies under one roof in the 2023 election manifesto (p.261).

Beyond this, the promise of economic growth, welfare, and prosperity becomes more prominent in the framework of *Century of Türkiye*. For instance, the third part of the 2023 election manifesto is titled "Stable and strong economy" while the section 19 of this part presents the theme of "Pioneering Turkey in High Technologies". In this section, the pathway of the new era is defined as the industry and technology to become the main pillars, within which the reinforcement of independence, the increase in welfare by "identifying science and technology as one of the most ambitious areas of Century of Turkey vision" (p.273).

The new era defined by technological transformation to reach economic prosperity is summarized in the following statement: “To implement our development policies aimed at achieving a current account surplus and inclusive prosperity, we are targeting a new era of technological advancement” (p.273). In addition to the inclusive prosperity goal, sustainable welfare growth is envisaged within the high-tech transformation:

“As the Justice and Development Party, we believe that our economic and social development in the Century of Turkey relies on innovative production. Sustainable welfare growth can only be achieved by focusing on high technologies and adopting a human and skill-based approach through a value-added production system rooted in R&D and innovation. In this context, we aim to enhance our research, development, and commercialization capacity across all sectors, from agriculture to industry, and from services to social innovation. We will elevate our education, science, and practical infrastructure to a level that can compete with developed countries, starting from an early age” (p.272).

In the light of these statements on economic growth, welfare, and prosperity through high-tech transformation in the election manifesto, 12<sup>th</sup> Development Plan presents the official policy orientation for these objectives after the elections won by AKP and once again Erdoğan elected as the president. As stated in this strategic document, the developmental agenda is designed with a long-term perspective of envisioning 2053 as well as for the new century of the Republic. The main objectives of the plan blends with new themes while a stable growth model is targeted:

"The Twelfth Development Plan has been prepared with the vision of 'an environmentally conscious, disaster-resistant, high value-added, advanced technology-based, income-equitably sharing, stable, strong, and prosperous Turkey' in the Century of Turkey. In line with this vision, a stable growth model will be implemented that focuses on green and digital transformation, where the industrial sector plays a leading role integrated with the agriculture and services sectors, strengthens our country's position in world trade, provides high-quality financing opportunities, and maximizes employment" (p.2).

The 12<sup>th</sup> Development Plan emphasizes a comprehensive approach to economic growth based on technological transformation. This approach aims to position the country as a leader in sustainable and technologically advanced economic practices, driving long-term growth and development in every sector.

In addition to the official framework on technology outlined in major policy documents like development plans, key sectors advancing the NTI have also issued their own policy documents to support the goal of economic growth, prosperity, and welfare. For instance, “The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2021-2025” has been prepared by Digital Transformation Office of the Presidency in collaboration with the Ministry of Industry and Technology and participation of all relevant stakeholders as mentioned in the office’s website. This strategy aims “to create value on a global scale with an agile and sustainable AI ecosystem for a prosperous Türkiye” in line with the "Digital Türkiye" vision and the "National Technology Initiative".

The policy priorities of the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy are defined to enhance the social welfare and strengthen national security while the concept of welfare becomes prominent in the strategic document. Moreover, Digital Transformation Office (DTO) coordinates the techno-entrepreneurship strategy with the Ministry of Industry and Technology while equal opportunity in every area of society is highlighted for ensuring an inclusive and sustainable growth model in the strategic document of techno-entrepreneurship strategy. Within the framework of entrepreneurship, Terminal İstanbul, located at the former Atatürk Airport, has been established to serve as the epicenter of a new wave of technology, as stated by the Minister of Industry and Technology Mehmet Fatih Kacır in 2024:

"Now, we are embarking on a new journey with a very broad network of stakeholders to bring a new function to this center. We are transforming this place, the Atatürk Airport terminals, into the world's largest technology and entrepreneurship hub under the Terminal İstanbul brand."<sup>55</sup>

Turkcell CEO Ali Taha Koç, the former Head of the Digital Transformation Office, also expressed support for Terminal İstanbul as a stakeholder, hoping that Turkey's digital transformation will be realized through the startups that sprout and take root here in Terminal İstanbul<sup>56</sup>. The investment ecosystem to enhance economic growth

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<sup>55</sup> ["Terminal İstanbul Tanıtım Toplantısı" sonrası paydaşlardan açıklama: - Haber 1](#)

<sup>56</sup> [Terminal İstanbul Tanıtım Toplantısı \(youtube.com\)](#)

is also supported by the production of the national car. The minister of Industry and Technology Fatih Kacır states that:

“TOGG is leading the transformation of Turkey's largest export sector, the automotive industry. TOGG is already working with more than 30 different startups, demonstrating its commitment to fostering innovation. We recognize that changes in technology create unique opportunities for us to innovate and succeed. Therefore, having a strong startup ecosystem is a crucial part of the National Technology Initiative.”<sup>57</sup>

Smart cities are viewed as another facet of economic growth as an expanding global market and supporting the investment ecosystem. While “2020-2023 National Smart Cities Strategy” and action plan addresses the physical, social, and digital planning of cities, Erdoğan states that “a new urbanization act has been started” by emphasizing not just solving our own problems but highlighting being a player in global market in the field of smart cities in his speech at Smart Cities and Municipalities Congress and Exhibition in 2020.<sup>58</sup> Murat Kurum, the minister of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, highlights that:

"According to the Smart City Global Market Analysis, the global smart cities market size is expected to reach \$826 billion by 2024. Currently, our country's share of this market is at a very low level. We need to strongly introduce our smart city applications to the global market by 2023. If we can make the right investments and production, we could contribute at least 25-30 billion liras annually to our economy. This is our goal. Therefore, we are initiating activities related to creating the necessary market environment to meet the demands for human resources, technology, and investment in the smart city sector.”<sup>59</sup>

In this regard, Murat Kurum stated that they will provide financial support to municipalities and entrepreneurs for smart city transformation and increase the capacity of qualified human resources in the smart city sector by promoting ‘Smart City Expertise’. Additionally, efforts will be made to enhance the qualifications of

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<sup>57</sup> [Haber | T.C. Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanlığı](#)

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-insani-oncelemeyen-bir-sehrin-akli-da-olmaz-454320.html>

<sup>59</sup> <https://csb.gov.tr/kurum-dunyanin-dorduncu-akilli-sehir-eylem-planini-acikliyoruz-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-29680>

those working in smart cities and to increase employment in this area. At the Istanbul Economic Summit in December 2023, themed 'Sustainable Living and Smart Cities,' Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz emphasized the need both to improve the living conditions in the cities and the investment climate in the business sector to achieve the status of a developed nation while he asserted the importance of national technology in improving the investment environment. He also states that “As our President has also highlighted, we are committed to ensuring that every future investment in our cities aligns with the National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan.”<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, the space technologies are highlighted with the phrase “space economy” in the “National Space Program Strategy Document (2022-2030)” while stating Turkey has adopted the space exploration as a priority issue from economic, technological, strategic, and political perspectives with the establishment of Turkish Space Agency (TUA) in the growing global space economy. The future of space programs within the context of NTI is asserted as following by the Minister of Industry and Technology, Fatih Kacır:

"In the future, we will also carry out an unmanned Moon mission with our indigenous spacecraft. We will enhance our space access capabilities with our national rocket systems and establish our own spaceport. We will locally produce satellite constellations that form positioning and timing systems. We will never fall behind in the race for development and will not abandon the National Technology Initiative. And now, we are starting manned space research. This is a shared achievement of the Turkish nation. Therefore, be proud, Türkiye."<sup>61</sup>

In summary, this part examines how the dominant narrative on development, centered around technology, is shaped by promoting economic growth, prosperity, and welfare in the political propaganda texts, official strategic documents, and the speeches of important political actors. It further aims to illuminate the populist maneuvers and strategies employed by the AKP and President Erdoğan to reinforce

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.akilisehirler.gov.tr/2024/01/03/2024-2030/>

<sup>61</sup> [Bakan Kacır açıkladı: Uzay limanı kuracağız! - FotoHaber - Ekonomi \(sabah.com.tr\)](https://www.fotohaber.com.tr/ekonomi/bakan-kacir-acikladi-uzay-limani-kuracagiz!-fotohaber-ekonomi-sabah.com.tr)

their authority within the new regime, using technology as a foundational tool. In this regard, the following outcomes might be regarded as the culmination of this part:

- **Emphasizing ‘underdevelopment’ prior to their tenure:** The major rhetorical strategy employed by Erdoğan and the AKP’s key political actors to strengthen the bond with the AKP’s electoral base is emphasizing the country’s underdevelopment prior to their leadership, contrasted with their successful developmental agenda. This strategy is particularly significant within the narrative of the ‘new era’, which is constructed around high-tech transformation and has constantly evolved and expanded during the 2018-2023 period.
- **The necessity of the Presidential Government System:** The presidential system is advocated by framing its role within the new development trajectory centered on technology. By linking the presidential system to the development agenda, the AKP seeks to legitimize its authority and underscore its indispensability in driving the nation toward a prosperous and technologically advanced future.
- **The emergence of new key strategic fields:** The representation of strategic documents about artificial intelligence, techno-entrepreneurship, space exploration, and smart cities, alongside the defense industry advancements and the promotion of national car TOGG, has further strengthened the developmental agenda’s promise of economic growth, welfare, and prosperity.
- **Deflecting criticism with the claims of holistic approach:** Criticism of the AKP, President Erdoğan, and the new regime is addressed by highlighting claims of a holistic and long-term development policy oriented around technology. Simultaneously, new areas of conflict are introduced to construct a populist strategy centered on identifying and confronting the ‘enemies’ of the nation—a topic that will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

In the following part, the symbolic dimension of the developmental agenda based on technology will be discussed.

#### **4.1.2. Embodying the Will and Aspirations of the Nation**

The first aspect of framing the developmental agenda on a national scale involves prioritizing measurable goals such as economic growth, social welfare, and national prosperity within the AKP's political strategy to strengthen the new regime and sustain its authoritarian power in the presidency. Complementing this, the populist approach embedded in the promotion of the National Technology Initiative incorporates a symbolic dimension that addresses the nation's will and aspirations, in reinventing them as embedded in the AKP's broader discourse on "Strong and Great Turkey". This is achieved by aligning these aspirations with the objectives of the NTI.

In this context, the concept of technology serves as a fertile ground for political strategies to engage with the public and generate consent by positioning them with the 'new era' that the AKP and its political actors seek to establish. The following statement of President Erdoğan delivered in Teknofest 2023 opening encapsulates the core of this call, yearning to the will and aspirations of the nation by emphasizing the role of the AKP's rule:

"We broke the chains of backwardness in Turkey. We established the infrastructure of a great and strong Turkey. We instilled the self-confidence in our youth to say, 'I can do it too.' We demonstrated that dependence on others, assembling parts, and constantly needing others is not the fate of our nation. We laid the foundations of a Turkey that is a beacon of hope not only for its own citizens but also for all the oppressed and disadvantaged. With our investments, we made our country the shining star of its region. God willing, you will build the Century of Turkey."

In this regard, the narrative on technology is part of a broader discourse on AKP's identity, which is defined in terms of representing national values rooted in the last two centuries of Turkish political history as well as Turkish civilization. This broader discourse intertwines with an image of progress by positioning technology as a symbol of the country's future aspirations and a tool for achieving political and social objectives. By framing technology in this way, political actors can appeal to a sense of national pride through calling will and aspirations of the nation which is framed as "Strong and Great Turkey" by AKP's official discourse as in the following statement in the 2023 election manifesto:

“Our first important characteristic is this: the AK Party is not just a political party, but also a movement with a cause. With this understanding and idea, the AK Party has advanced on a political path that represents the national values and thoughts in our country’s last two centuries of political history and follows the lines of our civilization. Thus, it possesses an understanding that goes far beyond and deeper than a mere political party identity. There are two main elements that sustain our cause. The first consists of proposals and determinations related to Turkey, and the second to the world. These are also our responsibility to our nation, the ideals of a "Strong and Great Turkey" and "A More Just World is Possible" (p.7).

While both ideals defined in the statement above finds their projection in the political vision in NTI, “Strong and Great Turkey” feeds the aspiration of “Fully Independent Turkey” within which the role of technological transformation becomes more prominent and being “local and national (*yerli ve milli*)” is defined as the key to become fully independent. This intertwining with higher level discourse also leverages technological achievements as evidence of the AKP’s success and legitimacy as in the following statement in the 2023 election manifesto:

“As AK Party, if we do not achieve our goals in many areas such as defense industry, natural gas and oil exploration, economy, healthcare and pharmaceutical industry, combating terrorism, determining roles in foreign policy, and space exploration, we cannot speak of a Fully Independent Turkey. While working towards the ideal of a fully independent Turkey, we are carrying the banner of national pride, from an active foreign policy that leads in conflict resolution to achievements in the national defense industry, domestic automobiles, the national space program, public health, and success in the social security system” (p.12).

Erdoğan emphasized that achieving goals in key areas such as the defense industry, energy exploration, economy, healthcare, counterterrorism, foreign policy, and space exploration is essential for realizing a "Fully Independent Turkey." He highlighted the AKP's commitment to national will, showcasing successes in conflict resolution, national defense, domestic automotive production, the space program, public health, and the social security system as crucial steps toward this ideal.

Building upon this, the symbolic aspect of technology narrative is also shaped by contextualizing the will and aspirations of the nation within a historical perspective by referencing what ancestors (*ecdad*) achieved and to follow their leads. The



reiterative narrative is shaped around referencing to the Ottoman era and pioneering names in aviation and national production *Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş and Nuri Killigil* in early years of the Republic. For instance, the foreword of Erdoğan in “The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2021-2025” references to El-Cezeri as following: "El-Cezeri from Şırnak, considered the founder of the field of cybernetics, achieved the 'impossible' for his time with the hydraulic machines he developed centuries ago" to highlight this nation has such a rooted history. Within the same line, Erdoğan gives reference to Ottoman period as in his following speech:

"We are a nation that comes from a tradition with a strong, local, and national defense industry in its history. Remember, the Şahi cannons, designed by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror himself, were among the most advanced weapons of their time, weighing up to 18 tons. The Ottoman Empire possessed one of the world's leading industries in rifle production for many years."<sup>62</sup>

In the 2022 publication of TÜBA dedicated to “National Technology Initiative”, within which “a scientific corpus” is tried to be created, chapter 3 titled "National Knowledge and Technological Advancement Initiatives in Late Ottoman and Republic Of Türkiye (1860-1960)" also focuses on the historical development of knowledge and technology in Türkiye from the late Ottoman period through the early years of the Republic. This chapter highlights the importance given to the historical roots of the developmental agenda shaped around NTI.

In addition, the path to high-tech transformation is defined in the AKP’s 2023 election manifesto as following: "Following in the footsteps of pioneering figures such as Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş, and Nuri Killigil, we will continue to elevate the projects we have initiated, ensuring that those who attempt to hinder our technological development have no opportunity to do so." (p.272). Furthermore, Mustafa Varank states the importance of societal support for such endeavors in 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy document: "In our history, early initiatives such as those of Nuri Demirağ and Vecihi Hürkuş, as well as the Devrim car, were left

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<sup>62</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : Roketsan Uydu Fırlatma, Uzay Sistemleri ve İleri Teknolojiler Araştırma Merkezi ile Patlayıcı Hammadde Üretim Tesisi Açılış Töreni’nde Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

unfinished because an ecosystem couldn't be built, and sufficient public support wasn't achieved” (p.3). President Erdoğan also highlights the importance of defense industry referencing to the symbolic names for this industry in shaping the narrative on will and aspirations of the nation:

"The level we have reached, particularly in unmanned aerial vehicle technology, is a testament to the globally recognized success of our defense capabilities. Just 10 years ago, there were those who wouldn't sell us these vehicles even for money, and when we sought maintenance, they would say, 'Come back tomorrow.' Today, those same circles are talking about the game-changing Turkish UAVs and the breakthroughs they have achieved. Behind this success are the Turkish engineers, technicians, and technologists who revived the unfulfilled struggles of patriots like Nuri Demirağ, Nuri Killigil, and Vecihi Hürkuş."<sup>63</sup>

In this regard, the key political strategy for sustaining social mobilization is to cultivate the nation's will and aspirations by promoting strategic areas of development, ranging from the defense industry to the space economy, national automotive production, digitalization, and artificial intelligence. This approach is exemplified in the following statement by Erdoğan, in contrasting Turkey's past limitations with its present achievements:

"Remember, our country once experienced times when, as the late Cem Karaca's song 'Tamirci Çırağı' expressed, our people were told, 'You are a worker, remain a worker,' and their progress was hindered in every area. But now, no one can say, 'You are a worker, remain a worker,' if they dare; because now we have a youth that is sending rockets into space. We have UAVs, armed drones, and Akıncı aircraft; we are in space with all of these. We have our Kaan aircraft; with these, we are in the skies."<sup>64</sup>

Erdoğan strategically positions their role in embodying the will and aspirations of the nation as pivotal by highlighting the nation's transformation into a technologically advanced power with a capable youth, exemplified by its progress in aerospace and defense. Space exploration is also being promoted to fulfill the aspirations of the Turkish nation. This initiative is not only about advancing scientific and

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<sup>63</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/130352/baykar-akinci-taarruzi-insansiz-hava-araci-tiha-teslimat-ve-kurs-bitirme-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>64</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : TEKNOFEST'i Ziyaretlerinde Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://tccb.gov.tr/t.c.cumhurbaşkanlığı-teknofest-i-ziyaretlerinde-yaptiklari-konusma)

technological capabilities but also about inspiring a sense of national aspirations and unity. By venturing into space, Turkey aims to showcase its potential on the global stage, demonstrating its commitment to innovation and progress. Ultimately, space exploration represents a broader vision of national development and ambition, aligning with the developmental agenda of economic growth, welfare, and prosperity. In this regard, National Space Program is presented by President Erdoğan in 2021 as we will be going to the moon in the 100th year of our Republic in 2023 at last while this program is the continuation of the achievements in the many fields.<sup>65</sup> In the introductory meeting of the National Space Program, Erdoğan highlighted once again that Turkish nation is the heirs of a groundbreaking civilization by referencing to the significant names such as the first Turkish and Muslim astronomer El Fergani, El Sufi, El Burini, Ali Kuşçu, El Cezeri (Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1.** The initiation of the National Space Program

Furthermore, Alper Gezeravcı, Turkey's first astronaut, has emerged as a significant figure in highlighting the country's role in the "cosmic race" in 2024. His achievement is promoted not only symbolizing Turkey's growing presence in space exploration but also celebrated within the axis National Technology Initiative while the phrase "Be Proud Türkiye" becomes prominent in the celebrations.<sup>66</sup> Gezeravcı's journey to space station is framed as the nation's aspirations to compete and collaborate on the global stage in the field of space exploration, both showcasing Turkey's potential and ambition in this emerging domain and representing it as a

<sup>65</sup> [Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: İnşallah Ay'a gidiyoruz - YouTube](#)

<sup>66</sup> [İlk Türk Astronotumuz Alper Gezeravcı'nın Uzay Yolculuğu Başladı | TÜBİTAK | Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu \(tubitak.gov.tr\)](#)

contribution to humanity. Also, the contribution to humanity as an important aspiration of the developmental agenda of the technological transformation beyond economic prosperity is emphasized in the preface of Erdoğan in “The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2021-2025”:

"We have the opportunity to make a comprehensive techno-economic breakthrough, enriched by our deep-rooted civilizational experience, by designing artificial intelligence systems in a way that aligns with our shared values and encompasses the development and operation of these systems, thereby adding value to all humanity."

Another key strategic field to address the will and aspirations of the nation is finally being able to produce the national car ‘TOGG’. This initiative represents the culmination of a longstanding aspiration and described as “more than just a vehicle”, representing national will and the symbol of the country's technological and economic progress. The political strategies that marked the production of TOGG as in the nation's quest for technological innovation, underscoring a collective sense of accomplishment and identity. Moreover, this endeavor’s promotion aligns with the broader vision of strengthening Turkey's self-sufficiency with “local and national” production. In the speech at the award ceremony of TÜBİTAK and TÜBA in 2022, Erdoğan emphasizes the importance of bridging the past and future while stating the role of the cultural capital in the advancements leading to the production of TOGG:

"In the 100th year of our Republic, we will publish scholarly works titled 'Turkish Maarif Encyclopedia,' 'National Technology Initiative,' and 'Local Histories of the National Struggle.' I extend my gratitude to all the scholars working under the auspices of TÜBA, who have contributed to bringing these rare works to our country, bridging the past and the future, and enhancing our cultural capital. The answer to why we could produce Turkey's first domestically made car, TOGG, not in the past but today, lies right here."<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, the "Local and National Pride" TOGG is being celebrated nationwide, with the car showcased in various places, including Pursaklar, Hendek, Nevşehir, Düzce as well as during special events like ‘Domestic Goods Week’.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/142328/tubitak-ve-tuba-odulleri-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>68</sup> [Yerli ve Milli Gurur TOGG Pursaklar’da](#)

From schools where students are introduced to TOGG, to police vehicles drawing public admiration, the car has become a symbol of national will, resonating deeply with citizens across the country who take great pride in its local and national origins.

Moreover, to fulfill the nation's will and aspirations for technological development, the role of the youth is emphasized as declared by Erdoğan that they are raising a "Teknofest Generation."<sup>69</sup> Especially in the Teknofest speeches, Erdoğan addresses the youth and their role to actualize NTI as following "The truth and need of Turkey are embodied by the Teknofest generation."<sup>70</sup> In addition, he refers to this phrase in promoting the technological development by stating that "the youth he describes as the 'Teknofest youth' in Turkey continues to move forward with determination, overcoming the obstacles placed in their way."<sup>71</sup> In the same line, the Teknofest generation is also supported by Emine Erdoğan<sup>72</sup> by stating that "We have a Teknofest youth that, nourished by national and spiritual values, is willing to use their knowledge for the benefit of their country and humanity, with a conscience as strong as their intellect." The minister of Industry and Technology Fatih Kacır also states that "As long as Turkish youth stand with us and hold on to the National Technology Initiative, we will not be defeated, God willing."<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion, to explore and understand how the symbolic aspect of the developmental agenda around technology is constructed, this section first examines how the will and aspirations of the nation are contextualized within the broader

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[YERLİ VE MİLLİ GURUR TOGG HENDEK'TE | T.C. Hendek Belediyesi Resmi İnternet Sitesi](#)  
[Yerli Malı Haftası'nda öğrenciler TOGG ile tanıştı İhlas Haber Ajansı \(iha.com.tr\)](#)  
[Yerli Malı Haftası Etkinlikleri Kapsamında Öğrenciler TOGG ile Buluştu. Başkan Zeybek Öğrencilerle Yakından İlgilendi - GÜNDEM - Afyon Türkeli Gazetesi Afyon Haberleri \(afyonturkeligazetesi.com\)](#)  
[Polis aracı Togg'a vatandaşlardan yoğun ilgi: 'Yerli ve milli olması gurur verici' \(abamedya.com\)](#)  
[Düzceliler TOGG'a bayıldı Düzce.Gündemdekiler Haberleri Düzce Tv \(duzcetv.com\)](#)  
[Yerli Otomobil TOGG Nevşehir'de \(beyazgazete.com\)](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Erdoğan: Artık bir Teknofest gençliği yetiştiriyoruz \(birgun.net\)](#)

<sup>70</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : TEKNOFEST 2022'de Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](#)

<sup>71</sup> [Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türkiye ile BAE gençliği arasındaki iş birliğini güçlendirmek için yeni adımlar atıyoruz \(aa.com.tr\)](#)

<sup>72</sup> [Emine Erdoğan: Vicdanı da zekası gibi güçlü bir TEKNOFEST gençliğimiz var \(birgun.net\)](#)

<sup>73</sup> [TEKNOFEST Ankara'nın kapanış töreni yapıldı \(aa.com.tr\)](#)

discourse of a “Strong and Great Turkey” and “Fully Independent Turkey”, while also referencing significant figures in science from the Ottoman era and the early Republican period. It then discusses how certain strategic fields within the framework of the NTI are positioned to build the symbolic dimension of this technology narrative. This is epitomized in President Erdoğan’s speech in promoting *Century of Turkey* and technological transformation:

"Today, we stand before our nation with a new phase of our projects, and God willing, we will see many more in the future. We are realizing, one by one, the dreams that our nation has pursued for centuries and that we have continuously strived for since the founding of our Republic." <sup>74</sup>

In this regard, the following conclusions could be drawn from the examination of this part:

- **Reimagining/ redefining the nation’s will and aspirations:** By aligning the nation's will and aspirations with the goals of the NTI and emphasizing the pivotal role of the AKP's leadership in this process, the objective is to engage the public and build broad-based support. The new era, branded as the *Century of Turkey* and guided by the NTI roadmap, is envisioned to be realized by the nation, with a special emphasis on the youth, referred to as the 'Teknofest Generation'.
- **Integration of the NTI with the broader discourse of the political authority:** The national will and aspiration are defined with the broader discourse of AKP’s vision for a "Strong and Great Turkey” and “Fully Independent Turkey”, where “local and national (*yerli ve milli*)” production is crucial under the guidance of the NTI. This approach enables the reinvention of national will and aspirations as embedded in the AKP’s broader discourse on representing the country.
- **Invoking historical references:** In support of this, the will and aspirations of the nation are contextualized within a historical perspective by referencing the achievements of the ancestors (*ecdat*) and following their legacy. This

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<sup>74</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : İstikbalin Yüzyılı Tanıtım Programı’nda Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

recurring narrative is shaped by invoking the Ottoman era and highlighting pioneering figures in aviation and national production, such as Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş, and Nuri Killigil, from the early years of the Republic.

- **The symbols of national will and aspirations:** The key political strategy for sustaining social mobilization is the promotion of strategic development areas, ranging from the defense industry to the space economy, national automotive production, digitalization, and artificial intelligence, as representations and symbols of the national will. This approach is exemplified by surpassing the limitations of previous strategies through current achievements.

In the following section, strong leadership will be analyzed as a populist strategy fostering the leader as the ‘guardian’/ ‘bearer’ of technological development.

#### **4.2. Strong Leadership**

The technology narrative, officially shaped at national scale around developmentalism, is disseminated across global, local, and national scales by the leader, who represents the vision of the National Technology Initiative. The strategic documents and speeches of key political figures consistently emphasize the importance of leadership in achieving the objectives of the NTI. This suggests the deliberate construction of a leadership cult, within which the persona of the leader is elevated to a central role, serving as a pivotal mechanism to legitimize and perpetuate the new regime and its technology policy. The constant reiteration of strong leadership in both strategic documents and political speeches not only reinforces the leader’s symbolic authority but also underlines the necessity of this centralized figure to maintain coherence and continuity in the political and ideological direction of the technological transformation.

Within this context, the Presidential Government System already establishes the institutional and legal frameworks to encompass all duties under the powerful leadership notion. In this newly established executive domain, President Erdoğan consolidates his authority through the populist strategy centered around the NTI. The

key political figures emphasize Erdoğan's indispensable role who ensures the technological transformation as well as country's stability, economic prosperity, and standing in the global order through this process. In addition, by highlighting the AKP's achievements, Erdoğan strengthens his leadership position, portraying himself as the figure capable of overcoming the nation's enemies, whom he categorizes as both internal (typically the opposition or former elites) and external threats. In this regard, the theme of strong leadership is elaborated into two parts:

- (i) The indispensable role of the leader,
- (ii) The leader against the enemies of the nation.

#### **4.2.1. The Indispensable Role of the Leader**

The presidential system has been based on the fundamental principle that the leader has an essential role in ensuring political stability, economic growth, and sustaining effective management as derived from the promotion of it by the AKP. the role of the leader is also presented as the guarantee of making fast decisions with the executive power given to the leader. Thus, new governing model will bypass the barriers of the bureaucracy under the strong leadership as stated in the AKP's 2018 election manifesto:

"With the constitutional amendment, we are transitioning to a state system that will make decisions more quickly and operate more efficiently under the leadership of the Presidency, which is given executive power as the head of state. We are entering a period where the parliament and government will work more harmoniously together" (p.17).

Similarly, in the 11<sup>th</sup> Development Plan (2019-2023), it is emphasized that policies laid down in the plan will be much more efficiently implemented within the framework of the Presidential Government System, given the effective structure of the executive function. After the first five years of the new governing model, AKP's 2023 election manifesto demonstrates the benefits of this model, particularly in terms of making and implementing decisions quickly. This is represented due to the elimination of different political leanings among the President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister, unlike in previous periods. In this sense, the presidential system is



promoted in terms of gathering civilian authority and democratic legitimacy in a more effective way under the leadership of the presidency.

In addition to referring to the NTI as one of the most important objectives in the strategic documents of different public institutions, the phrase “under the leadership and vision of our president” is expressed to highlight the Erdoğan’s role and strong leadership. As in Mustafa Varank’s statement in the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy document, both the importance of the presidential system and the ‘new era’ is emphasized:

"Under the leadership of our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, our country has undergone a significant transformation in every aspect. Over the past 17 years, we have fought great battles to protect our unity, stability, and political and economic stability against threats, open challenges, and attacks in our region. With the introduction of the Presidential Government System, endorsed by our nation, we have entered a new era where business processes are simplified, and results are achieved more quickly” (p.3).

The role/guidance/vision of President Erdoğan also emphasized by the deputy minister of Industry and Technology in the preface of the ministry’s strategic plan as following "The Ministry of Industry and Technology's Strategic Plan, guided by our President's leadership in the 'National Technology Initiative, aims to develop a strong domestic industry that not only uses high technology but also produces it” (p.2). While Fatih Kacır, as the new minister of Industry and Technology since 2023, asserts the role of President Erdoğan and the achievements in the context of the NTI in the Ministry of Industry and Technology Strategic Plan 2020-2024:

"Under the leadership of our President over the past 22 years, we have focused on paradigm shifts, from technology and product development to building a resilient, sustainable, and competitive production infrastructure and a flexible and agile R&D innovation ecosystem. Our domestic and national car, TOGG, our unmanned aerial vehicles that have radically changed the global war paradigm, and our domestic and national products and technologies developed in the fields of space, aviation, and defense industries are the most concrete examples of this approach” (p.2).

As above statement remarks, ‘the strategic vision’ of the President and his leadership portrayed as central to the nation’s progress in achieving technological

As a leader, his legitimacy is bolstered by his successive election victories, which he leverages to position himself as the embodiment of the national will. Through this narrative, Erdoğan is portrayed not only as a political leader but also as a visionary guiding Turkey towards technological self-sufficiency and innovation for his nation while also representing it in the global order. This portrayal reinforces his authority and AKP's commitment to advancing the country's technological capabilities, thereby aiming to secure broader support. In this regard, most of the speeches of the government officials mentions and thanks to the president Erdoğan regarding the NTI. As epitomized in the following statement of the former minister of Transport and Infrastructure Adil Karaismailoğlu in the news about the national train before the 2023 elections, electing the president Erdoğan again for the continuation of the achievements is a necessity:

"We have meticulously planned the investments for the next 30 years. We are working to bring to life the 'Century of Turkey' vision announced by our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, through our investments. We will continue to increase the steps we have taken to open up the sector. Under the leadership of our President, we will collectively achieve much greater services. On May 14th, we will elect both our President and our representatives in the Parliament. To continue the stability and investments achieved so far, we need to continue our path with our President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan." <sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> İlk Milli Elektrikli Tren Seti TCDD'ye teslim edildi (aa.com.tr)

entrepreneurship. The entanglement of his leadership with the national policy of the country reveals itself in the growing mentions of the phrase “Erdoğan’s Turkey” as Urbinati (2019) states “all populist regimes take ‘the name of the leader’” (p.113).

To sum up, the role of the president in the new regime is already important with the executive powers given to the position. Erdoğan's authoritarianism, legitimized by his electoral victories and his claims on representing the national will, the implementation of a new policy orientation like the National Technology Initiative (NTI) necessitates his active promotion of this vision to sustain the electoral base and legitimize the new regime. In this regard, the portrayal of Erdoğan as the visionary guide of the NTI by the AKP’s key political actors reinforces and promotes the image of strong leadership to sustain the political authority represented by Erdoğan. In this regard, the populist strategy of strong leadership entangles with the image of Erdoğan and the nation as well as the new regime and the achievements in national technology around the NTI. However, not just emphasizing the indispensable role of the leader is key in sustaining the image of strong leadership to promote technological advancement but also an enemy must be constructed for a populist strategy. In this regard, the emphasis on the indispensable role of the leader and the achievements is strategically emphasized as a foundation to foster an 'us versus them' duality.

#### **4.2.2. The Leader Against the Enemies of the Nation**

Another key aspect of the strong leadership strategy is emphasizing the ‘enemies’ of the nation and how they are bypassed the political authority to ensure technological development. This strategy often involves identifying and sidelining perceived adversaries or critics, thereby solidifying a unified national identity and improving public support. In this context, the implementation of the NTI serves as a symbolic framework, representing the nation's strength and resilience in the face of external and internal threats. Particularly, Erdoğan's speeches on the NTI, published on the presidency's website between 2018 and 2023, consistently emphasizes the opposition to the country's achievements, portraying them as challenges that must be overcome to ensure continued progress and stability. This narrative not only underscores the

importance of national unity but also frames the government's actions as necessary measures to protect and advance the nation's interests under the strong leadership of the president within the framework of new regime.

As in the following statement of Erdoğan at the opening ceremony for the TOGG Engineering, Design, and Production Facilities in 2020, he addresses “the enemies” of such achievements even if the national car project, symbolizing national strength and capacity, has received widespread support from the nation:

“Instead of sharing the joy of 83 million people, they went out to find faults in the project with ridiculous reasons, from the menu to the start button. With headlines like “The car even has a hood and headlights,” they actually revealed their own levels, their own ignorance, and their inferiority complexes.”<sup>76</sup>

He continues to reflect on the history of sabotage against Turkey's efforts to become self-reliant, citing numerous instances where significant industrial projects faced obstruction. These acts of sabotage, according to him, were often orchestrated by various factions and interest groups with the intent to hinder the nation's progress. In his speeches, he specifically denounces the opposition, with criticism directed at the CHP and its associated media outlets, accusing them of actively working to undermine current national projects. He states that in the same speech:

“On this sacred path we set out by wearing our shrouds for the survival of our country and the peace of our nation, we also took the risk of being struck and will continue to do so. Whatever we have achieved in the last 18 years, we have achieved despite sabotage, attempts to block us, and threats. With every step we took, we faced the resistance of parasites accustomed to making money from money and those who thrive on crisis and chaos. We fought not only against centers of tutelage, bureaucratic oligarchy, and those with a mentality of managing by compromise but also against the lobby of opposition that has plagued Turkey for 80 years.”<sup>77</sup>

Sabotage against the achievements in the country is an important theme to fuel the narrative of leader against the enemies of the nation. Despite the sabotages and

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<sup>76</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/120657/turkiye-nin-otomobili-nin-uretilecegi-togg-muhendislik-tasarim-ve-uretim-tesisleri-insaatina-baslama-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>77</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/120657/turkiye-nin-otomobili-nin-uretilecegi-togg-muhendislik-tasarim-ve-uretim-tesisleri-insaatina-baslama-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>

challenges, Erdoğan constantly emphasize that the Turkish people have shown an unwavering commitment to progress and self-reliance, successfully navigating and overcoming obstacles posed by certain political factions and vested interests. This narrative seeks to bolster the government as the true champion of the nation's interests for a strong and independent Turkey under his leadership.

In highlighting the struggle against the nation's enemies, another significant recurring theme is the reference to “the mentality/mindset” that prevailed in Turkey before the AKP governments. This theme often emphasizes the contrast between the perceived stagnation or external influence of the past and the current leadership's commitment to fostering a more independent and assertive national identity. By drawing attention to this shift, the narrative seeks to underscore the transformative changes brought about under their governance, positioning the present era as a pivotal moment in Turkey's development. In the 2023 AKP election manifesto, which presents the new era as Century of Türkiye, emphasizing the revolutionary mindset of the AKP escalates while the previous periods condemned with their weak mindset:

“Why weren't the developments in the national defense industry, especially UAVs and UCAVs, achieved when other parties were in power? Why couldn't Turkey assert its presence in the Blue Homeland in other periods? Why couldn't this country produce domestic cars and helicopter engines for decades? Why couldn't Turkey reach the power to make its own national aircraft? In fact, the answer to all these questions is summed up in one word: Mindset... Due to this mindset, just like protecting the homeland and the Blue Homeland, the spiritual homeland also needed to be protected; like Hagia Sophia... But none of these could be done, why? Because doing all these was the job of such local and national-minded cadres who believe in the ideal of a "Strong and Great Turkey” (p.7).

As the above statement reveals, the defense industry holds an important role in terms protecting and developing the Turkey both for enemies internal and external. In this sense, the leadership of Erdoğan is generally highlighted by the key political actors of in advancing the defense industry Recently, Haluk Görgün, the president of the Secretariat of Defense Industries (SSB) states that "Under the leadership of our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, our defense industry has made great advances in recent years. We will continue to bring the successes of our advancing defense

industry to the world, in collaboration with friendly and allied countries, within the framework of mutual benefit."<sup>78</sup> Erdoğan himself emphasizes the importance of defense industry after mentioning how internal and external enemies weakened the country before them and how he focused on the advancements in this field since he is a prime minister, in his 2018 speech in Teknofest:

“...Recognizing this issue, the late Turgut Özal established the Undersecretariat for Defense Industries to address projects holistically. Although some important projects were initiated within the constraints of that period, by 2003, only 20% of the defense industry's needs were met domestically, with little high technology among this percentage. During my tenure as Prime Minister, I took this field under my personal patronage and initiated a major leap forward. I personally followed every stage of the projects, from design to financing. By canceling many ready-made procurement projects for products such as tanks, helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles, we started developing entirely national and original models. As a result, Turkey has become a country that can produce 65% of its defense industry needs domestically. We not only met our own needs but also reached a significant level of export.”<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Erdoğan mentions the achievements of Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles and highlighting that they will not let allow the mentality of “CHP and its allies” to obstruct such achievements to further fuel the enemy’s rhetoric in the same speech:

“We witnessed firsthand the challenges Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles went through to reach these days. Despite their success in homeland defense and counter-terrorism, our unmanned and armed unmanned aerial vehicles are still targets of the CHP and its allies. We have come to these days fighting against the fascist mentality that looks down on our people, calling them "pasta eaters," "coal grabbers," and "belly scratchers." In the last 18 years, so to speak, we both stoned the devil and circumambulated. Despite CHP's obstructive politics, we ultimately united our country with its dreams in every field, from industry to production, health to national technology. Because we trust this country, this nation. We believe in Turkey's potential and in the determination of the Turkish nation, whose history is filled with glorious epics, to overcome challenges.”

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<sup>78</sup> [Savunma Sanayii Başkanı Haluk Görgün, Görevini İsmail Demir'den Devraldı | TeknoHAB Teknoloji Geliştirme Bölgesi](#)

<sup>79</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/98791/teknofest-istanbul-da-yaptiklari-konusma>

In this sense, Erdoğan evokes a sense of national cause over the achievements in the defense industry while the rhetoric of enemy could flourish in a more comprehensive way. On the other hand, the opposition leader of RPP Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu attends the TEKNOFEST 2022 highlighting the technological development in Turkey should be supported no matter what:

“Let's put these aside, friends. What is important here is this: Turkey is making good investments in the field of technology, especially in the defense industry. All of us need to support these investments; it's as simple as that. It is wrong to make distinctions between Party A and Party B when it comes to these investments. After all, it is our people who are making these advancements. The workers here, the students studying at universities, they are our children. Who would want to overshadow the successes achieved by our own children?”<sup>80</sup>

While the opposition evaluates technological developments ‘above politics’ to some extent, there were criticisms considering Teknofest. CHP spokesperson Faik Öztrak highlighted economic difficulties faced by citizens, mentioning that a young person who won first place at Teknofest Karadeniz had to sell the medal they received from Erdoğan due to financial hardships by stating "This is where words fail. Not only young people but also our children are being tested with hunger and deprivation under this government."<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, highlighting the struggle against the nation's enemies and the mindset of sabotaging achievements also becomes prominent in the repetitive reference to Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş and Nuri Killigil, who were pioneers in aviation in the early Republican period. The narrative built around their stories is also discussed in the previous sections in terms of being ancestors to follow their path while another dimension of this narrative shaped by how they are blocked and not letting the same failure as they have experienced for the current developments. This narrative, started since 2018, becomes one of the cornerstones in the 2023 AKP election manifesto while promoting Century of Türkiye as in the following statement:

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<sup>80</sup> [Teknofest'i gezen Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan 'İHA-SİHA' sorusuna yanıt \(birgun.net\)](https://www.birgun.net/tr/teknofest-i-gezen-kilicdaroğlu-ndan-İHA-SİHA-sorusuna-yanıt)

<sup>81</sup> [X'te Televizyon: "CHP Sözcüsü Faik Öztrak: Teknofest Karadeniz'de birinci olan bir gencimiz, maddi imkânsızlıklar nedeniyle Erdoğan'ın elinden aldığı madalyayı satmak zorunda kalmış. Bu sözün bittiği yerdir" / X](https://www.x.com/p/televizyon/CHP-Sözcüsü-Faik-Öztrak-Teknofest-Karadeniz-de-birinci-olan-bir-gencimiz-maddi-imkânsızlıklar-nedeniyle-Erdoğan'ın-elinden-aldığı-madalyayı-satmak-zorunda-kalmış-Bu-sözün-bittiği-yerdir-/X)

"To make a strong start in the new century of our Republic, we embarked on a path from being a country striving to catch up with the era to becoming a country that leads the era. Following in the footsteps of pioneering figures like Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş, and Nuri Killigil, we will elevate the projects we initiated without giving any opportunity to those trying to hinder our technological development to a higher level. For this reason, we have designated science and technology as one of the most ambitious areas of our vision for the Century of Turkey."

This narrative is also supported by significant political actors. For instance, Selçuk Bayraktar mentions being predecessors of a civilization that has been disrupted.<sup>82</sup> When promoting NTI especially in Teknofest openings, Bayraktar refers to '*Nuri Demirağ, Vecihi Hürkuş and Nuri Killigil*' by mentioning the wrongdoings against these visionaries and their achievements in the history of Turkey, in celebrating the NTI to bypass this mentality<sup>83</sup>:

"On the 100th anniversary of *Büyük Taarruz*, with AKINCI in the sky, in the spirit of Vecihi, in our national aircraft Hürkuş, in Samsun where the torch of our National Struggle was lit, in the skies of TEKNOFEST, with the excitement of a child touching an aircraft, I greet my young brothers and sisters who participated in the technology competitions along with our Nation... Long live a strong Turkey with the National Technology Initiative... Long live a fully independent Turkey..."

The minister of Industry and Technology Fatih Kacır also supports this narrative by mentioning the NTI under the leadership of Erdoğan in his speech in 2023:

"...We achieved this through our National Technology Initiative under the leadership of our esteemed President, by considering our own opportunities and strengths, and by taking into account the challenges we face. Of course, reaching this point was not easy; we encountered various obstacles. There were those who tried to hinder our progress, so to speak. However, we knew that we needed to bring out the hidden potential within us. We were aware that we needed to create a revolution in mindset. In line with our goals for the 'National Technology Initiative,' we rose from our ashes. We stood by our youth to ensure that they do not experience the disappointments faced by Vecihi Hürkuş, Nuri Demirağ, Şakir Zümre, and Nuri Killigil."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> [Selçuk Bayraktar, "Erdoğan'ın Yerini Damadı Alacak" İddiasına Cevap Verdi | Az Önce Konuştum \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Selçuk-Bayraktar-\)

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/ilk-kez-teknofest-karadenizde-ucus-gosterisi-yaptilar-42129988>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.dha.com.tr/teknoloji/bakan-kacir-milli-teknoloji-hamlesi-ile-kullerimizden-yeniden-dogduk-2347138>



By elevating this repetitive reference to pioneers, the political narrative underscores a collective commitment to overcoming challenges and achieving national self-sufficiency in technological development under the leadership of the President Erdoğan thanks to the path open with NTI, its motto could be summarized as “Long live NTI...”

In this regard, Teknofest openings become the showcase for Erdoğan to further fuel the enemy rhetoric while promoting the NTI. He attends the festival each year by making significant speeches. In the first Teknofest in 2018, he asserts that Teknofest is ‘the symbol event of Turkey's NTI’ while his speeches from 2018 to 2023 follows the same pattern particularly fueling the people and enemy division with varying degree. First, he states that how short-sighted and malice views of political elites caused underdevelopment in Turkey’s technological path. Then, he highlights how they have struggled to overcome tutelage, strengthened democracy, and reinforced the supremacy of the national will as in the following statement in Teknofest 2019 speech:

“Of course, this struggle was not easy. Every kind of obstacle was placed in our path, every kind of trap was set, and every kind of game was played against us. There were times when they tried to shut down our party, times when they tried to engulf our country in blood and fire with terrorist organizations, and times when they tried to create chaos in the streets and turn our people against each other. There were even times when a coup attempt was made using a faction within the police-judiciary establishment and the army. They targeted not only our unity but also our economy...We are working not only to leave a homeland to future generations but also to make our country one of the strongest in the region and the world. This is our goal. The best response we can give to those who try to trap our country in a vicious cycle again is right here.”<sup>85</sup>

Also, in his Teknofest speeches, the enemy’s rhetoric evolves around “so-called elites”, a vague enemy called “those”, or the actors of old Turkey while the theme of these speeches escalates to questioning why the technological achievements have not done until their rule by claiming those who aspire to govern the country again promises the old Turkey:

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<sup>85</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/98791/teknofest-istanbul-da-yaptiklari-konusma>

“My dear brothers and sisters, these people are extremely subservient to the West and extremely rude and arrogant towards their own people and country. You, like us, know this inadequate group of so-called elites who never leave their own neighborhood, who are in fact lumpen. You also know that whatever we have achieved and whichever areas we have advanced our country in, we have done so despite these people.”<sup>86</sup>

In 2023, three Teknofest was held İstanbul in April, İstanbul in August and İzmir in September. In his İstanbul 2023 speech just before the 2023 elections, Erdoğan highlights that how these varying enemies/actors are threat to the achievements and if they come to power, this will obstruct the path to development in technology field:

"In recent days, they have revealed the hatred and animosity they harbor within themselves through scandalous statements. One person talks about interfering with Turkey's defense projects if they come to power, another claims that the UAVs and drones are made from models. Yet another says that the TCG Anadolu has a lifespan of only two bombs. Another talks about handing over the symbolic location of Turkey's most prominent projects to American companies." <sup>87</sup>

Then, Erdoğan continues his speech by stating that “the best response is the view in here against the ones who tries to belittle the NTI and even intend to destroy it if they can.”

In conclusion, the NTI has become a strategy nurturing the perception of strong leadership. First, the indispensable role of the leader is emphasized by promoting the presidential system. From the very beginning, the presidential system has been based on the fundamental principle that the leader has an essential role in ensuring political stability, economic growth, welfare and prosperity. In addition, Erdoğan is the strong leader to fulfill the developmental agenda of AKP based on technological transformation. Highlighting the achievements is important to support the strong leadership image and to represent the will and aspirations of the nation, which is deliberately become sabotaged and underdeveloped both by past political elites and current opposition. The leader is the one to bypass all the enemies of the nation. In this regard, the following outcomes might be regarded as the culmination of this part:

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<sup>86</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/130701/teknofest-2021-de-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>87</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/122191/gaziantep-teknofest-programi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma>

- **Setting direction to bypass the enemies of the nation:** To further enhance the NTI, it is essential to overcome the enemies. This narrative contributes to the reinforcement of the strong leadership strategy.
- **Emphasizing the sabotage against the past and current achievements:** The repeated references are built around specific individuals who are undermined by the so-called elite mindset, a vague enemy referred to as 'those,' or the actors of the old Turkey. President Erdoğan, as well as key political agents, deploy this enemy-people division in their statements.

The following section will discuss how the NTI is strategically leveraged to enhance Turkey's international reputation on a global scale, supporting the developmental agenda led by strong leadership. The initiative is not a national strategy but is also positioned as a key element in Turkey's broader geopolitical position. The NTI thus serves as a tool to assert Turkey's technological sovereignty and solidify its influence in international arenas, all under the guidance of a leadership that is depicted as both visionary and indispensable.

#### **4.3. International Reputation**

The narrative built on technology not only entails addressing the national scale but also necessitates to be recognized globally to enhance the powerful representation of the new regime. In this regard, the international reputation garnered through technological development is one of the most important aspects of the populist strategy of Erdoğan and the AKP due to its capacity to reinforce the impact of the populist strategy. By emphasizing technological advancements, the political authority seeks to project a strong, modern, and progressive nation image on the global scale while not only aiming for economic growth but also fostering the nation's influence in international affairs. This theme will be discussed in two axes:

- (i) being a 'player' in the global order is emphasized,
- (ii) elevating national pride, glory, and prestige.

First, achieving a leadership position in the global dynamics within the framework of NTI will be covered by focusing on how economic as well as political independence

is emphasized. Then, how elevating national pride, glory, and prestige in the global context is pursued through the promotion of the advancements of the NTI will be elaborated.

#### **4.3.1. Being a Player in the Global Order**

Within the framework of the NTI, establishing the nation as a global player gain prominence, particularly for economic benefits, self-sufficiency, and political independence. The Presidential Government System is highlighted in terms of laying the foundation for political and economic stability.

For becoming a global and competitive player in the global market, attracting foreign investment in high-tech and productive sectors, creating investor-friendly policies, improving the business and investment environment becomes the main objectives in the economic sphere. In the AKP 2023 election manifesto, it is asserted that the AKP "will make the country more competitive by increasing the share of technology-intensive, high value-added sectors in economy. Also, in the same document, it is envisaged "to be among the leading countries in this highly competitive global field in all our relevant policies" (p.268). In this regard, Fatih Kacır already declares in the 2024-2028 Strategic Document of the Ministry of Industry and Technology that "With the breakthroughs we have achieved under the vision of the National Technology Initiative, Turkey has become a global game-changer beyond being a regional power" (p.2).

In the 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy document, it is noted in that Turkey intends to implement its National Technology Initiative to become a leading country in technology, thereby increasing its global competitiveness and ensuring that it maintains its economic and technological autonomy. With the help of this plan, substantial technological improvements will be made possible, and it will also serve as a model for other sectors that are working toward achieving success in the defense sector. Although 'local and national' transformation in areas such as national car production, techno-entrepreneurship, artificial intelligence, digitalization, and space economy may not be as advanced as those in the defense sector, the strategic policy

orientation in these fields is similarly geared towards positioning Turkey as a global player.

In this regard, the impact and importance of defense industry is framed as “the locomotive” of the technological development as in the following statement of Erdoğan:

"I'm saying all this for a reason: The defense industry is never just about the defense industry. The defense industry means, of course, first and foremost establishing the design and production infrastructure to meet the needs of our own military. But beyond that, the defense industry is the driving force / locomotive of the ecosystem that will enable our country to become a global leader in high technology."<sup>88</sup>

Especially, the achievement in both national production of UAVs and their use in the international field is emphasized in terms of making Turkey as a leading nation in UAV technologies in the essay of Selçuk Bayraktar in TUBA publication dedicated to NTI:

Turkey has become one of the few countries worldwide to develop unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which are considered the second wave in aviation. Initially regarded as auxiliary elements on the battlefield, UAVs have demonstrated their capability to serve as primary combat assets, especially highlighted during Azerbaijan's operation to liberate Karabakh from occupation, where Turkish forces achieved their first victory using armed UAVs (UCAVs). Turkey has emerged as a leading nation in UAV technologies, excelling both in their development and operational use (TUBA, 2022).

In many of Erdoğan's speeches, UAVs are highlighted to bolster the political promotion of the defense industry, emphasizing how they have elevated Turkey to a significant position on the global stage. In addition, Teknofest, renowned as the world's largest aviation, space, and technology event, has become a significant platform for promoting the defense industry. On the other hand, the sustainability and consistency of the defense industry should be considered due to its institutional structure and decision-making capacities within the context of the new regime, despite being promoted as the driving force behind global leadership.

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<sup>88</sup> T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : İstikbalin Yüzyılı Tanıtım Programı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma ([tccb.gov.tr](http://tccb.gov.tr))

Being a global leader in technological development is also supported in various fields. For instance, in the objectives of TÜBİTAK, particularly by supporting research and development activities and developing space and defense technologies become prominent to further enhance Turkey's position in the global order. In the same line, National Space Program Strategy (2022-2030) document highlights the importance “to establish a sustainable, innovative, entrepreneurial, dynamic, efficient, and competitive space industry ecosystem that will increase self-sufficiency over time, and to turn the space sector into an area of activity that provides technological and financial returns through the space industry ecosystem to be established” (p. 46). In the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2021-2025, “it is aimed for Turkey to produce at least 23 smart products with a global market share or brand value as a world leader in at least one technology field” (p.28).

In the 2024 Local Elections Manifesto of AKP, the critical technologies and technological development is also highlighted for municipal services and smart cities to transform the cities by highlighting that the AKP following this evolving approach to city management:

“Building smart cities and transforming our existing cities according to this new understanding are among our priorities. Indeed, technological developments such as digitalization and artificial intelligence are changing expectations, management approaches, and service areas. We are working to combine these technologies with our service approach to make our cities strong actors in global competition” (p.6).

For this purpose, 2020-2023 National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan is prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, and it is stated by Erdoğan in a speech at the Smart Cities and Municipalities Congress and Exhibition in 2020 that “with all these preparations, Turkey is among the leading countries in the world in the field of smart cities.”<sup>89</sup>In addition, this vision also reflects the party's broader goals of positioning Turkey as a leader in the digital economy, leveraging technological advancements to boost economic growth, and ensuring that Turkey remains competitive on the global stage. The integration of technology into local

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<sup>89</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : Akıllı Şehirler ve Belediyeler Kongre ve Sergisi'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr/tccb/akilli-sehirler-ve-belediyeler-kongre-ve-sergisi-nde-yaptiklari-konusma)

governance is therefore not only about improving public services but also about driving innovation, attracting investment, and creating new opportunities for economic development.

In the AKP's 2023 election manifesto highlights the importance of "digitalization and smart economy" by asserting that: "Just as we have done with the living laboratories, incubation centers, technology development zones, and techno-parks that we have established so far, we will continue to make significant contributions in the coming period" (p.82). In this context, Murat Kurum, the Minister of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, and the AKP's 2024 Istanbul mayoral candidate, prominently emphasized the role of technology in his vision for the city throughout the election process. During the opening of Terminal Istanbul, Kurum articulated his ambition to transform Istanbul into a hub for technological innovation, declaring, "The world will look to Istanbul, and Istanbul will make the world talk with its technology." Kurum envisions Istanbul leading in technological advancements and knowledge production, positioning the city as a global technology leader.<sup>90</sup>

In addition, being a global leader in the technology race is supported by highlighting the importance of political independence by producing and exporting its own technology. Erdoğan states that: "In today's world, the first condition for true independence is to become a country that designs, develops, produces, and exports technology. As long as we remain merely users of technology, we cannot secure our freedom in any field."<sup>91</sup>. In "2023 Industry and Technology Strategy", being self-sufficient and independent through preserving national interests are also highlighted:

"The National Technology Initiative is a protest against monopolization in scientific and technological developments. The asymmetric concentration of science, technology, and prosperity in the hands of a few countries or companies poses a threat to the future of humanity. Such an order not only triggers conflicts but also disrupts world peace. It should not be forgotten that for each country, protecting the data of its citizens and developing and producing strategically valuable technological products with its own

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<sup>90</sup><https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/terminal-istanbul-tanitim-toreni-ak-partinin-ibb-baskan-adayi-kurum-istanbul-teknolojisiyle-dunyayi-konusturacak-42425661>

<sup>91</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : TEKNOFEST İstanbul'da Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/tccb.gov.tr)

capabilities are critical to preserving national sovereignty. By successfully implementing the National Technology Initiative, Turkey will strengthen its presence as a free and sovereign state in its challenging geographical region" (p.17).

Within the framework of this statement, the current global order is framed as a threat as technological and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few. By advancing the NTI, AKP aims to assert Turkey's independence and strengthen its powerful position in the global order both in the economic and political spheres. In this context, the pursuit of global leadership in technology is closely tied to the narrative of security, as political independence is seen as crucially dependent on technological advancement, particularly in the defense industry. In the TÜBA publication dedicated to the NTI, the chapter called "The Baykar Example on the Path to a Fully Independent and Prosperous Turkey" emphasize that "thanks to unmanned aerial vehicles, one of the most significant outcomes of the National Technology Initiative, the backbone of terrorists aiming to disrupt the peace of our society has been broken" (p.305). This approach is epitomized in the following statement of President Erdoğan:

"The impact of our technological investments is evident not only in the economic sector but also in the defense industry. We now have national technologies in many areas of the defense industry. We successfully neutralize many internal and external threats to our country through domestic and national production. For example, if we had been dependent on others in Afrin, we wouldn't have reached the position we are in today. But thankfully, without relying on anyone, we took matters into our own hands, set out on our path, and as of this morning, we have neutralized 1,780 terrorists. Of course, when you have your own weapons, your own armored vehicles, your own tanks, and your own artillery, the courage and morale of the soldiers increase accordingly." <sup>92</sup>

Advancements in the defense industry, along with significant progress in other sectors such as transportation, energy, and urbanization, are emphasized as key components of Turkey's strategy to position itself as a global player. These developments are not only seen as crucial for national security and economic growth

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<sup>92</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : "Geleceğini Planlamayan Milletler, Başkalarının Planlarının Parçası Olmaya Mahkûmdur" \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr/Geleceğini-Planlamayan-Milletler-Başkalarının-Planlarının-Parçası-Olmaya-Mahkûmdur)



but also as integral to political independence. In this regard, the strategy to international reputation is carried out around the following narratives:

- **Turkey as a global game-changer beyond being a regional power:** To become among the leading countries in the competitive global field by attracting foreign investment in high-tech, creating investor-friendly policies, improving the business and investment environment. Increasing economic independence by achieving breakthroughs in critical technologies structured under the NTI.
- **Highlighting the importance of political independence:** By producing and exporting its own technology, being self-sufficient and preserving national interests plays a pivotal role.
- **Promoting defense industry as the “locomotive” of both economic and political independence:** The defense industry serves as the driving force for being a global leader in high technology, setting the path for other sectors to follow. This strategy not only aims to boost international reputation but also underscores the importance of national security in achieving these ambitions.

Next, the discussion will focus on how the promotion of advancements under the National Technology Initiative is employed to elevate national pride, glory, and prestige on the global stage. In this regard, it will explore how the discursive construction of technology not only encompasses domestic politics but also addresses the global order as a symbolic area.

#### **4.3.2. Elevating National Pride, Glory, and Prestige**

Another crucial element in enhancing international reputation and reinforcing the AKP's populist strategy is the emphasis on national pride, the glorification of achievements, and the pursuit of prestige through the National Technology Initiative. This strategy not only highlights the importance of technological advancement but also serves as a tool for consolidating national unity and pride, in mobilizing public support centered on the NTI.

Within this framework, the most prominent narrative involves highlighting how Turkey's achievements have garnered international admiration and how the Turkish nation should take pride in these accomplishments. This is clearly demonstrated in Erdoğan's rhetoric, which often includes references to other countries being impressed by Turkey's technological advancements. An exemplary instance of this narrative is evident in Erdoğan's speech delivered at the TOGG Gemlik Campus Opening Ceremony in 2022, where he articulates how these achievements reflect the nation's strength and resilience, urging the Turkish people to recognize and take pride in their country's progress on the global stage:

"Is there anyone who doesn't feel joy in their heart when they see the achievements we have attained in every field, from defense industry to automotive, from energy to health, guided by our National Technology Initiative? ...Just wait, there's more to come, more to come. When TOGG enters the roads of Europe with all these models, they will be seriously alarmed. What will they say? They will say, 'The crazy Turks are coming.' Is there anyone who doesn't feel proud while benefiting from the work we have brought to our country in every field, from education to health, from security to justice, from transportation to energy? I see a picture of pride."

The narrative that "The West is envious of us," expressed by Erdoğan in 2021, can be viewed within a broader context that includes technological advancements. This framing has evolved to incorporate a strong emphasis on technology, positioning it as a critical arena where Turkey asserts its independence and superiority. A significant addition to this narrative is the phrase "The crazy Turks," which is used to address foreign countries in promoting the achievements in technological development. This expression not only serves to promote national glorification but also reinforces the idea that Turkey is challenging the perceptions of those who might underestimate its capabilities as highlighted by the following statements of Erdoğan:

"When we came into office, what was the rate of domestic production in the defense industry? It was 20 percent. And now? It's 80 percent. Look at how far we've come. Are we now making our own UAVs? Are we making our own armed UAVs? Are we making our own Akıncı? But above all, we've now made something else—what is it? Do we now have our own Kızılelma? And once we start mass production, these will be able to carry the same bombs as the F-16s. And with all of this, what is Greece saying now? They're asking, 'What are these crazy Turks doing?' Test launches have already been

conducted from İzmir, and the missile that will be launched from there has started to frighten them. And I say, 'Hey Greece, as long as you behave, we have no problem with you. Just be reasonable.'"<sup>93</sup>

As the statement above indicates, drones have become central to boosting national pride and prestige on a global scale. Erdoğan frequently references them in his speeches at various gatherings, underscoring their importance. Moreover, the production of national drones plays a crucial role in promoting technological independence, further enhancing national pride.

Furthermore, the frequently repeated statement in Erdoğan's speeches that 'we used to wait at their doors' emphasizes this sentiment in various gatherings such as meeting with Roman citizens in 2018, at the National Technology Development Infrastructures opening ceremony in 2018, provincial chairpersons meeting in 2019, Fenerbahçe high council meeting in 2019, at the 2019 Year-End Evaluation Meeting etc. Within this approach, the progress made from a time of dependency to a position of technological self-sufficiency is highlighted. This narrative underscores the significance of developing indigenous technologies as a source of both national pride and independence under the rule of the AKP. This approach is epitomized in the following statement of Erdoğan which is used in many of his speeches:

"They made us wait at their doors for a long time, so long that it was a constant 'come back tomorrow,' and in the end, they said, 'the congress didn't grant permission.' But, thanks to them, we are now property owners, and because of them, we also produced our unmanned aerial vehicles and our armed drones. Now, we are going even further."<sup>94</sup>

By framing/reframing the design, producing, and exporting national technology, the emphasis is placed on securing national independence and achieving self-sufficiency. This approach positions the National Technology Initiative (NTI) as a pivotal strategy not only for enhancing the economic and political standing on the global stage but also for promoting national pride and sentiment. The rhetoric surrounding NTI seeks to empower citizens by linking technological advancements directly to

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<sup>93</sup> <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/142542/mugla-fethiye-de-halka-hitapları>

<sup>94</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/99747/milli-teknoloji-gelistirme-altıyapıları-acilis-torende-yaptıkları-konusma>

national strength and autonomy. In this context, the elevation of national sentiments through a populist strategy unfolds as follows:

- **Emphasizing that Turkish nation should take pride in its technological advancement'**: Encouraging the Turkish people and urging them to see the advancements as a source of national strength and prestige on the global stage.
- **Utilizing a rhetoric for addressing the foreign countries around the technological development**: Repeating the phrases such as "The crazy Turks are coming" and "We used to wait at their doors." is central to emphasize the period from a time of dependency to achieving technological self-sufficiency, underscoring the nation's significant progress.

The following section will explore another aspect of the political strategy at the local scale, aimed at expanding the reach of the populist agenda.

#### **4.4. Dissemination into Everyday Life**

The populist strategy centered around the National Technology Initiative extends beyond grand narratives of national pride and international reputation; it also seeks to penetrate the everyday lives of citizens to garner widespread electoral support. While the emphasis on technological development to enhance global recognition can fuel national pride and bolster a sense of collective achievement, these broader themes alone may not be sufficient to sustain long-term public support. Recognizing this, the populist strategy of AKP and Erdoğan incorporates a crucial focus on the local scale, to make the benefits of the NTI evident to ordinary citizens. It ensures that the narrative of national technology is not confined to abstract notions of progress, development, and fulfilling long lasting aspirations of the nation, but is instead grounded in the lived experiences of individuals while solidifying technology narrative materially and discursively.

Concrete strategies are pursued at the local scale around the NTI to strengthen the visibility and power of the new regime. These strategies will be discussed by

demonstrating how social mobilization and integration of “all 81 cities” to this process is organized through Teknofest as “a symbol event of the NTI”. In addition, it will be discussed how technological advancements are promoted to improve daily life, whether through renewed public services or enhanced local infrastructure through projects such as smart cities, aiming to create a more immediate connection between citizens and the national agenda. These strategies will be discussed around the following frameworks:

- (i) Teknofest as means of disseminating technology narrative in the public sphere
- (ii) Improving public services, local infrastructure, and ‘new urbanization vision’.

#### **4.4.1. Teknofest as Means of Disseminating Technology Narrative in the Public Sphere**

For the dissemination of technology narrative, social mobilization is considered significant by AKP’s key political actors as well as the President Erdoğan. The statement of Mustafa Varank reveals the importance of societal support for the success of National Technology Initiative:

“The National Technology Initiative can only be realized with a spirit of social ownership and mobilization from every member of society, from young to old. The belief in the strength and future of this country, shared with a common ideal and excitement by all members of society, forms the foundation of the National Technology Initiative” (Industry Strategy Document 2023, p.18).

To achieve such a goal, it is crucial to involve society in this process, especially by engaging young people. Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz highlights the importance of the engagement of the youth by addressing them in his speech at the event title “Turkey’s Quantum Age Begins: Launch Ceremony of Turkey’s First Quantum Computer” held at the TOBB university technology center as follows:

“Your involvement in this field will not only contribute to the scientific future of our country but will also enable us to make a difference on a global scale. QuanT will provide you with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in quantum technology and take your first steps in this area. As today’s

university students, you are tomorrow's scientists, entrepreneurs, and leaders. We must never forget that great achievements begin with great dreams and self-confidence. Some circles may try to create an atmosphere of pessimism. There may be those who seek to encourage brain drain by directing our youth toward foreign countries. However, I want to particularly emphasize this point: young people, our most valuable capital is our qualified human resources. Not financial power, not underground or above-ground resources, not minerals... In today's world, our greatest strength that will make a real difference is you—our young minds. It is our fundamental duty to ensure that our people are provided with every possible opportunity for the future of our country, so that our nation can move confidently into tomorrow.”<sup>95</sup>

Within this framework, Teknofest becomes a key arena in showcasing the technological advancements around the NTI by fostering public engagement, particularly the participation of young people. There is a strong emphasis on the emergence of a “Teknofest generation”, to carry out the ideals of the National Technology Initiative. This emerging generation is actively promoted by political actors in building the future of the country around and as agents of a broader developmentalist agenda. In addition, as outlined in 2023 Strategic document of the Ministry of Industry and Technology Ministry, published in 2019, the festival is already defined as an umbrella organization which aims to socialize NTI through its nationwide competitions and exhibitions. In this regard, the expansion of Teknofest into cities across Anatolia and the emphasis to the “Anatolian cities” by stating their symbolic importance is one of the most significant examples of this effort. These cities are becoming active participants in the process, each contributing in their own way.

The President Erdoğan has attended this symbol event of Turkey's National Technology Initiative<sup>96</sup> each year by making the opening speeches. Both Erdoğan and Selçuk Bayraktar<sup>97</sup>, as one of the most important figures of the festival and ‘the older brother of Teknofest youth’ by representing both T3 Foundation and Baykar, mention that Teknofest is embraced by Anatolian cities. Because of this, it is decided to organize the festival in different cities in addition to İstanbul. Erdoğan states that

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<sup>95</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-yilmaz-milli-teknoloji-hamlesi-yarinlarimizi-da-guvence-altina-almayi-hedeflemektedir/3400008>

<sup>96</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/98791/teknofest-istanbul-da-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>97</sup> Baykar Defense Technical Director and Chairman of the T3 Foundation Board of Trustees

“the fire that was sparked by a handful of young people in Istanbul has now engulfed all of Anatolia and even our entire region.”<sup>98</sup> While Bayraktar announces that they could not remain silent to Anatolia's call for NTI and that they decided to hold Teknofest alternately in Istanbul and Anatolia each year.<sup>99</sup> Within this perspective, Teknofest held in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Gaziantep, Adana and Samsun, each city representing their region since 2018.

The first Teknofest held in Anatolia is in Gaziantep in 2020. At the opening ceremony of the events, the Turkish Air Force aerobatic team, Turkish Stars, along with Solo Türk, performed demonstration flights over the skies of Gaziantep as a fundamental show in all Teknofest events.<sup>100</sup> In his opening speech, Erdoğan highlights the importance of the east by mentioning that “The first stop of Teknofest in Anatolia was Gaziantep, a city that encompasses all the humanitarian and economic beauties of our country. Today, we came here to join the excitement rising from Gaziantep under the theme ‘the technology sun rises from the east’.”<sup>101</sup> In his speech, Erdoğan also emphasizes that they have established necessary structural and institutional organization within the scope of the new governing system to fulfill the technological transformation and help the young generation, in promoting Presidential Government System. He also asserts the importance of Anatolian cities for the technological transformation and the role of NTI represented by Teknofest:

“This is the place where our young person in Edirne, following in the footsteps of Lagari Hasan Çelebi and developing an interest in rocket science, can express themselves and showcase their abilities. This is the place where our child in Şırnak, dreaming of keeping alive the legacy of Cezeri, can demonstrate their skills in robotics. This is the place where our child in Trabzon, inspired by Hezarfen Ahmed Çelebi's efforts and turning towards aviation, can turn their passion into reality. This is the place that provides the opportunity sought by everyone who wants to revive our civilizational heritage on a technological level.”

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<sup>98</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : TEKNOFEST 2022'de Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

<sup>99</sup> ["TEKNOFEST 2022'yi Samsun'da düzenleyeceğiz" - Son Dakika Haberleri \(trthaber.com\)](https://www.trthaber.com)

<sup>100</sup> [Gaziantep'te TEKNOFEST 2020 heyecanı \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr)

<sup>101</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : Gaziantep TEKNOFEST Programı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

In addition, the representation of 81 cities is always mentioned through promoting the festival through the framework of the festival. While numerous projects race in the Teknofest competitions<sup>102</sup> published in local news outlets in Gaziantep, Selçuk Bayraktar in his closing speech cherished that Teknofest once again helped NTI to meet with the nation while expanding its reach to the nationwide and other nations too.<sup>103</sup> The celebration of Teknofest Gaziantep both building the future of the country, and the dreams of the young generation becomes the highlights of the speech of Mustafa Varank in the festival. He states that Teknofest has the power to transform society, noting that interest in the festival grows each year. He emphasizes that Teknofest, held in Gaziantep for the first time outside Istanbul, received a record number of applications despite the pandemic.<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, political figures in Gaziantep emphasize the significance of the festival for their city. Gaziantep Governor Davut Gül states that "Teknofest will add value to our city in every sense. It is immense pride for both our country and us to have young people from all over the world come to this historic and cultural city to engage in a technological initiative." Gaziantep Metropolitan Mayor Fatma Şahin also shares her excitement and pride, highlighting that it is the first time the ancient city has hosted such an event.<sup>105</sup>

Samsun becomes the second city, after Gaziantep, to hold Teknofest in 2022. Before Teknofest held in Samsun, defense industry achievements, by highlighting the national technology, are already recognized in the online publications of Samsun Metropolitan Municipality. For instance, SBB TV of Municipality and Samsun City Gazettes share the defense industry achievements by mentioning the National Technology Initiative. An online broadcast titled "May 19 Turkey Meeting" was held by the SBB TV YouTube channel in celebration of May 19, Atatürk

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<sup>102</sup> [Hakkari Savaş, maket uçaktan sonra İHA ve SİHA tasarlıyor \(hakkariobjektifhaber.com\)](https://www.hakkariobjektifhaber.com)

<sup>103</sup> [TEKNOFEST 2020 dolu dolu geçti \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr)

<sup>104</sup> [Bakan Varank: "TEKNOFEST'e ilgi her sene katlanarak artıyor" - \[İLKHA\] İlke Haber Ajansı \(ilkha.com\)](https://www.ilkha.com)

<sup>105</sup> [Bakan Varank: "TEKNOFEST'e ilgi her sene katlanarak artıyor" - \[İLKHA\] İlke Haber Ajansı \(ilkha.com\)](https://www.ilkha.com)



Commemoration, Youth and Sports Day, under the slogan "Turkey: The Country of Hope and Horizon." Minister of Youth and Sports Dr. Mehmet Muharrem Kasapoğlu, Ondokuz Mayıs University Rector Prof. Dr. Yavuz Ünal, Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Mustafa Demir and Selçuk Bayraktar participated in the program. Bayraktar highlights the importance of the city and shared the new hope of the country with UAVs and explained that they are working for Turkey to become fully independent and prosperous with NTI: "The spirit, the spirit of May 19, the spirit of the national struggle, honestly guides us as well."<sup>106</sup> The symbolic meaning of Samsun for Independence War is also emphasized while promoting Teknofest in Samsun. Bayraktar announces Teknofest Samsun as following:

"We will organize Teknofest 2022 in Samsun, where the torch of the national struggle was lit and the heroism epic of a nation began. Teknofest Karadeniz 2022 will be held in cities across the Black Sea region, centered in Samsun, which boasts the magnificent beauty of every shade of green and blue. May Teknofest Karadeniz be beneficial and auspicious for our children, our youth, Samsun, the Black Sea, Anatolia, our country, and all the regions it touches."<sup>107</sup>

Also, Minister of Industry and Technology Mustafa Varank expressed his satisfaction with igniting the festival spark from Samsun by stating that:

"As you know, Teknofest, the world's number one space, aviation, and technology festival, is an organization we hold to ignite the spark of technology in the hearts of our children and youth all over Turkey. God willing, next year Teknofest will start in Samsun and become Teknofest Black Sea. We are confident that Samsun will host us in the best way possible. The children and youth there will also engage deeply with technology. We know that the children of Samsun and the Black Sea region who participate in Teknofest will become Turkey's most successful engineers, astronauts, and technicians in the future."<sup>108</sup>

The event gains importance for the city as *Samsun Şehir Gazetesi* and other local publications actively promote it. Samsun Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Mustafa

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<sup>106</sup> [Baykar Teknoloji Lideri Selçuk Bayraktar: Milli mücadele ruhu bize de yol gösteriyor \(aa.com.tr\)](https://aa.com.tr/tr/teknofest/2022/samsun)

<sup>107</sup> "TEKNOFEST 2022'yi Samsun'da düzenleyeceğiz" - Son Dakika Haberleri (trthaber.com)

<sup>108</sup> [Milli Teknoloji hamlesi Samsun'a taşıyor! KARADENİZ EKONOMİ Karadenizin İlk ve Tek Ekonomi Gazetesi \(karadenizekonomi.com.tr\)](https://karadenizekonomi.com.tr)

Demir highlights the value of this festival for Samsun "We have an excellent organizational capability in Samsun. We will prepare for this festival in the best way possible."<sup>109</sup> Samsun Governor Zülkif Dağlı issued a message to tradespeople before the festival by asserting that Teknofest is an important event that once again proves how high the brand value of Samsun is.<sup>110</sup> He also states that by highlighting the defense industry achievements, Samsun will highly benefit from such event:

“This is the world's largest technology festival, a globally recognized event. It is a festival that transcends Turkey's borders. Samsun will take part in this in the best way possible and make its presence known. We will host our guests. There will be a very large number of participants. It will lead to positive developments for Samsun. Samsun has won many awards in previous Teknofests.”<sup>111</sup>

Erdoğan also attends the festival in Samsun, once again making the opening speech. He emphasizes how the fire ignited by a small group of young individuals in Istanbul has now spread to include the entirety of Anatolia and even our entire region while Teknofest is significantly shaping the destiny of our country.

After Teknofest, the tech events continue in Samsun while one of the conference rooms have been named *Teknofest Conference Room*.<sup>112</sup> The third leg of the Technology and Innovation Meetings, supported by Türk Telekom, was held in Samsun on November 24 while Türk Telekom SME Sales Director Cihan Demirlek states the support National Technology Initiative and local development in his opening speech of the event:

"We know that the most important steps that will carry Turkey into the future are digitalization, technology, and innovation. As Türk Telekom, we offer products, services, and solutions that will enhance the innovation capabilities

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<sup>109</sup> [Milli Teknoloji hamlesi Samsun'a taşıyor! KARADENİZ EKONOMİ Karadenizin İlk ve Tek Ekonomi Gazetesi \(karadenizekonomi.com.tr\)](http://karadenizekonomi.com.tr)

<sup>110</sup> [Vali Dağlı'dan, TEKNOFEST Öncesi Esnafa Mesaj - Sanayi Gazetesi](http://sanayigazetesi.com.tr)

<sup>111</sup> [Milli Teknoloji hamlesi Samsun'a taşıyor! KARADENİZ EKONOMİ Karadenizin İlk ve Tek Ekonomi Gazetesi \(karadenizekonomi.com.tr\)](http://karadenizekonomi.com.tr)

<sup>112</sup> [Samsun'da Teknoloji ve İnovasyon Buluşmaları - Samsun Haber / Samsun Haberleri / Samsun Sondagika Haberleri \(samsunsehirgazetesi.com\)](http://samsunsehirgazetesi.com)

of businesses and facilitate their digital transformation. In the context of international economy and competition, our priority is to implement domestic and national technologies, contributing to our nation's national technology initiative."<sup>113</sup>

While Fatih Kacır, the Minister of Industry and Technology since 2023, and Turkey's first astronaut Alper Gezeravcı visited Samsun for local government elections in 2023, they have reminded how Samsun Teknofest was important in terms of embodying NTI:

"Of course, I did not come to Samsun alone. I came with Turkey's first astronaut, Alper Gezeravcı. We are introducing our first astronaut to our young people at Samsun University and Ondokuz Mayıs University. Samsun holds a special place in our memory and history with Teknofest 2022. Truly, with Teknofest, Samsun has captured the excitement of the national technology initiative and the wind of technological entrepreneurship and innovation in a unique way."<sup>114</sup>

Also, Fatih Kacır highlights how Samsun is a rapidly growing Turkish industry city, thanks to its resources and capabilities in terms of the city's Organized Industrial Zones, R&D centers, smart city initiatives and electric buses are pioneering practices for Turkey. He also promises that the Ministry of Industry and Technology support Samsun and its people to further enhance their efforts around National Technology Initiative.

Teknofest 2023 holds special significance as it was organized in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey. This year, the festival expanded its reach by taking place in three major cities: it began in Istanbul in April, continued in Ankara starting on August 30th, coinciding with Victory Day, and concluded in İzmir in September. In the opening speeches in Teknofest İzmir, the importance of the "beautiful city" İzmir is highlighted while Erdoğan emphasizing the importance of İzmir by quoting Neşet Ertaş and Abdürrahim Karakoç. The Minister of Industry and Technology Fatih Kacır makes a speech in the event by highlighting İzmir's

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<sup>113</sup> [Samsun'da Teknoloji ve İnovasyon Buluşmaları - Samsun Haber / Samsun Haberleri / Samsun Sondakika Haberleri \(samsunsehirgazetesi.com\)](#)

<sup>114</sup> [Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanı ve Türkiye'nin ilk astronotu Samsun'da gençlerle buluştu - Samsun Haber Hattı | Samsun haber | Samsun haberleri \(samsunhaberhatti.com\)](#)

significance as a symbol city in Turkey's national struggle.<sup>115</sup> He emphasizes the importance of Anatolia by stating that Anatolia is gaining its self-confidence and their efforts in the last 20 years 'to uncover the hidden gems in Anatolian lands.' Fatih Kacır also states that:

"With the will, stance, and determination put forth by our President Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, we continue the journey of the National Technology Initiative in the Century of Turkey. We know that in this century, the star of the Turk will shine. We believe that in this century, the wind of the Turk will encompass the whole world."

As the below statement reveals, the framing of National Technology Initiative in Teknofest to build the Century of Turkey under the leadership of the President Erdoğan is an important agenda to gain support from the public. In this regard, to reinforce how Teknofest is supported in each city, the number of people who joined the festival is used as a crucial signifier. Selçuk Bayraktar also stated that since the first Teknofest in 2018, the event has hosted approximately 10 million visitors and it is the largest event in the history of the Republic, by highlighting the enthusiastic support from the public for the National Technology Initiative with the following statement in his remarks after Teknofest İzmir: "Our nation eagerly flocked to the national technology initiative, driven by a long-lost passion."<sup>116</sup>

Furthermore, at the Ankara Teknofest, there was a strong emphasis on a new beginning in the very place where past failures occurred, framed symbolically within the 100th anniversary of the Republic. The highlighted issue was that just 80 years ago, the aircraft factory of *Türk Hava Kurumu*, established in this square in Etimesgut, was deliberately driven to bankruptcy due to the obstructive mentality of those with external influences. However, it was stressed by Selçuk Bayraktar that this unfortunate fate was overcome with the festival held at Etimesgut Airport: "The brave rise from where they fall. The Teknofest we held at Etimesgut Airport is a

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<sup>115</sup> [İzmir'de TEKNOFEST heyecanı... Selçuk Bayraktar: Türkiye Yüzyılı'na sizler ve eserleriniz damga vuracak - Son Dakika Haberler \(hurriyet.com.tr\)](https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/izmir-de-teknoifest-heyecani...-selcuk-bayraktar-turkiye-yuzyili-na-sizler-ve-eserleriniz-damga-vuracak-son-dakika-haberler)

<sup>116</sup> [TEKNOFEST İzmir'e ziyaretçi akını: 1 milyon 100 bin kişi ziyaret etti - Son Dakika Haberleri \(trthaber.com\)](https://www.trthaber.com/teknoifest-izmir-e-ziyaretci-akini-1-milyon-100-bin-kisi-ziyaret-etti-son-dakika-haberleri)

herald of our rebirth."<sup>117</sup>. While Teknofest has been included among the official goals in the Ministry of Industry and Technology's 2024-2028 strategic plan, it has been announced that the festival will be held in Adana, representing the Aegean region, in 2024.

In creating a social mobilization for the National Technology Initiative through Teknofest, another key phrase that frequently emerges is "The youth of Teknofest" as declared by Erdoğan that they are raising a "Teknofest Generation."<sup>118</sup> This phrasing is often used to emphasize the youth as the bearers of the nation's will and aspirations for technological development. President Erdoğan addresses the youth and their role to actualize the NTI as following "The truth and need of Turkey are embodied by the Teknofest generation."<sup>119</sup> In addition, he refers to this phrase in promoting the technological development by stating that "the youth he describes as the 'Teknofest youth' in Turkey continues to move forward with determination, overcoming the obstacles placed in their way."<sup>120</sup> In the same line, the Teknofest generation is also supported by Emine Erdoğan<sup>121</sup> by stating that "We have a Teknofest youth that, nourished by national and spiritual values, is willing to use their knowledge for the benefit of their country and humanity, with a conscience as strong as their intellect." Fatih Kacır, the minister of Industry and Technology, also declares in one of his Teknofest speeches that "As long as Turkish youth stand with us and hold on to the National Technology Initiative, we will not be defeated, God willing"<sup>122</sup> by also mentioning to nurture a generation that will lead the country into the Turkish Century.

In this regard, the role of the technologically empowered youth around the goals of the NTI is constructed as a key element for the Turkish Century. The head of the

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<sup>117</sup> [TEKNOFEST Ankara'nın kapanış töreni yapıldı \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr)

<sup>118</sup> [Erdoğan: Artık bir Teknofest gençliği yetiştiriyoruz \(birgun.net\)](https://www.birgun.net)

<sup>119</sup> [T.C.CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI : TEKNOFEST 2022'de Yaptıkları Konuşma \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

<sup>120</sup> [Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türkiye ile BAE gençliği arasındaki iş birliğini güçlendirmek için yeni adımlar atıyoruz \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr)

<sup>121</sup> [Emine Erdoğan: Vicdanı da zekası gibi güçlü bir TEKNOFEST gençliğimiz var \(birgun.net\)](https://www.birgun.net)

<sup>122</sup> [TEKNOFEST Ankara'nın kapanış töreni yapıldı \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr)

Presidency's Director of Communications, Fahrettin Altun, states in of his speeches that youth are at the center of the Century of Turkey vision under the leadership of the President Erdoğan as follows:

“In all fields—science, development, industry, defense, education, technology, and beyond—youth are not objects but subjects. In both the present and the future vision of Türkiye, young people are foundational actors. They are also among the leading figures in Türkiye's efforts to influence and shape global communication processes. Whether it is pioneering technological innovations, launching innovative initiatives, making scientific discoveries, or using and transforming new technologies, young people are at the forefront of society. At the heart of this phenomenon lies, above all, the self-confidence, entrepreneurial spirit, and courage of our youth.”<sup>123</sup>

On the other hand, Erdoğan highlights that ‘some people’ are displeased with both the achievements and the rise of the Teknofest generation, while simultaneously delivering inspiring messages to young generation:

"The National Combat Aircraft took to the runway. Our IMECE Satellite was sent into space. Our Gökbey Helicopter ascended with our national engine. The Altay Tank was delivered to our military for testing. Hürjet and Atak-2 flew. Teknofest is the symbol of all these achievements. The synergy this event creates in our country is starting to seriously disturb some people. The booming Teknofest youth has already become a nightmare for certain circles in our country.”<sup>124</sup>

Key political figures of the AKP often highlight the notion of "Teknofest Generation" as the cornerstone of Turkey's technological ambitions around to the NTI. In this narrative, the youth is depicted as the bearers and agents of the nation's future through their alignment with the goals of the National Technology Initiative. This discursive construction of youth represents a strategic and symbolic dimension in reinforcing the national renewal around the objectives of the NTI by legitimizing the state-led innovation policies. In this context, the “Teknofest Generation” emerges as politically framed subjectivity which embodies the AKP's aspirations for a technologically advanced, independent, and globally competitive Turkey.

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskanligi-iletisim-baskani-altun-turkiye-yuzyili-vizyonunun-merkezinde-gencler-yer-aliyor/3404735>

<sup>124</sup> <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/146951/teknofest-i-ziyaretlerinde-yaptiklari-konusma>

In this regard, the following strategies outline how the dissemination of the technology narrative at the local level is orchestrated through Teknofest:

- **Positioning Teknofest as a ‘symbol event’ for social mobilization of the NTI:** It is important to emphasize that the National Technology Initiative can only be achieved through a collective spirit of social ownership and mobilization across all segments of society.
- **The role of Anatolian cities in embracing the NTI:** Teknofest helps the NTI to meet with the nation, while the Anatolian cities rhetoric plays a pivotal role in embracing the NTI.
- **Teknofest as means of enhancing ‘the brand value’ of the cities:** The festival serves as a powerful tool for the local political agents in terms of promoting both the NTI and the role of their city. By hosting the event, cities can showcase their commitment to development, attracting investment talent, and thereby elevating their status on a national scale.
- **Emphasizing the "Teknofest Generation" as the driving force behind Turkey's technological aspirations:** Portraying the youth as the bearers of the nation's future through the National Technology Initiative. While celebrating promoting the rise of this generation, while simultaneously celebrating their rise and fueling rhetoric against ‘certain groups’ who are unsettled by this emerging generation.

In conclusion, Teknofest functions as a strategic instrument of the National Technology Initiative which serves as a key platform for social mobilization and populist strategy. By framing technological development as a collective national project, Teknofest fosters a sense of social ownership across all segments of society. Its rotation across Anatolian cities allows the NTI to embed the initiative within local contexts while enhancing the “brand value” of host cities through alignment with national ambitions. Whereas the “Teknofest Generation,” mobilized as a political subject and set in contrast to those who are portrayed as unsettled by their rise, thereby reinforcing a populist narrative of national renewal through technology.

#### **4.4.2. Improving Public Services, Local Infrastructure, and ‘New Urbanization Vision’**

The AKP’s approach in promoting technology at local scale around the National Technology Initiative, as outlined in their local government election manifestos of 2019 and 2023, emphasizes the integration of digital infrastructure into local governance, such as IoT (Internet of Things), big data analytics, and artificial intelligence, to improve public services, enhance citizen participation, optimize resource use, and reduce environmental impact. This technological focus is primarily structured around the concepts of ‘digital governance’ and ‘smart cities,’ which represent key pillars of the AKP’s broader agenda for urban development. The rhetoric surrounding ‘digital governance’ and ‘smart cities’ suggests a progressive agenda to increase the livability of urban areas and improve the quality of life while it reflects efforts to engage local scale in alignment with the national agenda on National Technology Initiative. As in the following statement in 2024 Local Government Manifesto of AKP, local governance is framed in line with the goals of The Century of Turkey framework, particularly in terms of participation to decision-making processes:

“In the Century of Türkiye, inspired by the achievements we have gained in domestic and national technologies, we will further enrich our strong democracy with digital participation methods. We will expand the use of digital participation methods in our municipalities, such as electronic voting, online deliberation, demand-driven rational decision-making, mobile applications, and online real-time and active participation applications. In the coming years, we will integrate new generation technologies like artificial intelligence, big data, open data, robotic technologies, the Internet of Things, unmanned aerial vehicles, and digital twins into our municipal services to enhance service quality. In doing so, we will make life easier for our citizens and ensure greater participation of our residents in decision-making processes” (p.32).

With the rhetoric around digitalization of public services and new urbanization vision, AKP's deployment of technology extends to everyday practices while it also reinforces the party's promotion of its municipal branding, “Municipality from the Heart (*Gönül Belediyeciliği*)” and “True Municipalism (*Gerçek Belediyecilik*)”. In



promoting their citizen-centered municipality approach, the role of adapting technological developments is highlighted in AKP's visions and goals in each election period. In this regard, the preface of President Erdoğan in 2019 Local Government Manifesto of AKP emphasizes the importance of digital technologies in municipal services and to harness this potential by promoting domestic solutions to put them at the service of the citizens. In addition, he highlights that "in a time when mobile technologies have advanced so significantly, we will not let Turkey fall behind in this great race" (p.13). In 2024 Local Government Manifesto of AKP, this framing escalates to build "the cities of the Century of Turkey" in promoting technological transformation.

In this regard, AKP aims to create urban environments that are efficient, sustainable, inclusive, and technologically advanced. This agenda finds its projection in the urban realm through the concept of smart city in line with the National Technology Initiative. The new path of future urbanization is declared in "National Smart City Policy Paper 2020-2023" within the framework of the 11<sup>th</sup> development plan. Erdoğan states that "a new urbanization act has been started" in his speech at Smart Cities and Municipalities Congress and Exhibition in 2020 by emphasizing not just solving our own problems but highlighting being a player in global market in the field of smart cities.<sup>125</sup> "National Smart City Policy Paper 2020-2023" provides a detailed strategy for transforming Turkey's cities into smart urban centers through the integration of advanced technologies, particularly those developed domestically:

"With this perspective, a dynamic and organic Smart City Ecosystem will be created, consisting of individuals and institutions capable of developing and utilizing Smart City Governance and domestic Smart City Solutions with national capabilities. This ecosystem will generate new employment and economic opportunities in our country's Smart City transformation and set the vision for it" (p.37).

By embracing the concept of smart cities, local government reforms are initiated, and it is planned the preparation of a City-Specific Local Smart City Strategy and roadmap by the Local Governments in collaboration with the Ministry of

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<sup>125</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-insani-oncelemeyen-bir-sehrin-akli-da-olmaz-454320.html>

Environment and Urbanization's General Directorate of Geographical Information Systems and the General Directorate of Local Governments. The roadmap will act as a comprehensive guide for integrating smart technologies and solutions, promoting sustainable urban development, and improving the quality of life for residents in these cities. To achieve these goals, several initiatives have been launched at the local level, ensuring that local strategies align with and contribute to the broader objectives of the National Technology Initiative. This integration ensures that local smart city efforts not only address the unique needs of individual cities but also support and enhance the country's overall technological and economic agenda. For instance, Konya Metropolitan Municipality, in collaboration with ASELSAN, held a Stakeholder Draft Evaluation Meeting as part of the "Konya Smart City Strategy and Roadmap" project.<sup>126</sup> This project exemplifies how local governments are working with key partners to develop tailored smart city strategies. The collaboration with ASELSAN, a prominent Turkish defense and electronics company, underscores the emphasis on leveraging national technological capabilities to drive the smart city agenda. Similarly, Kayseri Metropolitan Municipality has been consulting with the information technology (IT) sector regarding smart city initiatives.<sup>127</sup> These examples illustrate how local governments in Turkey are aligning with the broader National Technology Initiative.

On the other hand, it is envisaged for urban transformation projects to facilitate smart city concept. The new urbanization narrative, alongside these transformation projects and mega-projects, is being actively promoted through conferences, panels, and speeches by prominent government officials. This shift underscores the government's commitment to aligning Turkey's urban development with the technological transformation around National Technology Initiative. In this context, Murat Kurum, the president of TOKİ between 2009-2018, the minister of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change between 2018-2023 and the AKP's 2024 Istanbul mayoral candidate, has emphasized that the adoption of smart city concepts plays a

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<sup>126</sup> <https://www.karamanhabercisi.com/konya-akilli-sehir-stratejisi-ve-yol-haritasi-projesinde-paydaslar-bir-araya-geldi-44355h.htm>

<sup>127</sup> [Başkan Büyükkılıç'tan Bilişim Sektörü ile "Akıllı Şehir" İstişaresi | Kayseri Büyükşehir Belediyesi](#)

crucial role in contentious and ambitious projects like Kanal İstanbul.<sup>128</sup> Murat Kurum's remarks highlight the strategic importance of smart city principles in shaping the future of urbanization in Turkey, particularly in projects that are expected to have a significant impact on the country's economic and environmental landscape.

By embedding and promoting smart technologies into these large-scale urban initiatives, the ongoing transformation of İstanbul's northern reserve area — highlighted by projects like the third bridge and the third airport—continues to reinforce the narrative of new urbanization vision of AKP. In addition, Murat Kurum in his statement at the 'Urban Transformation Symposium' held in Istanbul, which addressed urban planning efforts and the smart city concept in Turkey emphasized that “We always said that: Urban transformation is a matter of survival (*beka*) and always above politics, never to be neglected.” in framing the importance of technological integration to urban transformation.<sup>129</sup>

The promotion of smart city concept in large-scale projects is also epitomized in Esenler Smart City project in İstanbul, which is presented in a former military zone at İstanbul northern reserve area as a model project for future path of urbanization and to improve the lives of the citizens. The project has been initiated with the protocol among the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning, Ministry of Industry and Technology and Esenler Municipality. 'Turkey's Smart Cities e-Workshop: Esenler' was held to discuss Turkey's smart cities through the Esenler project with the participation of the stakeholders. Esenler Mayor Tevfik Göksü states the vision of the urbanization as "striving to create a city that embodies the perfection defined by Farabi and eliminates the hope and fear described by Galileo" (p.8) while the Deputy Minister of Industry and Technology Fatih Kacır highlights the importance of Esenler project for National Technology Initiative as following:

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<sup>128</sup> <https://csb.gov.tr/akilli-sehir-uygulamalarinda-ilk-ornek-kanal-istanbul-olacak-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-29695>

<https://www.trthaber.com/haber/turkiye/bakan-kurum-kanal-istanbul-projesiyle-iki-ornek-akilli-sehri-de-yapacagiz-448973.html>

<sup>129</sup> [BAKAN KURUM İSTANBUL'DA KENTSEL DÖNÜŞÜM SEMPOZYUMU'NA KATILDI \(csb.gov.tr\)](https://csb.gov.tr/BAKAN-KURUM-İSTANBUL'DA-KENTSEL-DÖNÜŞÜM-SEMPOZYUMU'NA-KATILDI)

"I believe that the Esenler Smart City project, with the contributions of three stakeholders, will become a source of pride for our country. Esenler will become a hub to produce local and national technologies necessary for smart cities, in line with our National Technology Initiative" (p.9).



**Figure 4.2.** View from the buildings of Esenler Smart City (Photo taken by the author)

The first phase of the project is a smart urban transformation project, which has already been implemented, accompanied by the establishment of a newly developed national park (*millet bahçesi*) nearby (Figure 4.2). This phase was heavily promoted by the municipality as a flagship project in innovative smart urban planning around themes of sustainability and environmentally conscious development. The municipality emphasized the ‘smart urban transformation’ project with billboards throughout Esenler’s densely populated neighborhood (Figure 4.3), projecting an image of modernity and development. However, observations made during a field visit in June 2021 revealed a significant difference between this official narrative and local public opinion. When asked about the new residential project, many residents referred to the site as “just those TOKİ houses”, implying a continuation of state-driven mass housing practices since. This framing suggests that despite the municipality’s branding efforts, the new residential area framed as ‘smart’ was perceived as yet another standardized TOKİ housing model. In other words, there is a

gap between the project's intended image, emphasizing innovation, sustainability, and technological advancement, and the public's perception. For this development, the concept of smart is more as a discursive tool for legitimizing state-led urban transformation while such projects of local governments serve to extend the scope of the National Technology Initiative to various fields.



**Figure 4.3.** View from the buildings of Esenler Smart City (Photo taken by the author)

Whereas the second phase of Esenler project, branded as Esenler Smart City, has yet to be built in one of the few remaining green spaces within Esenler's dense urban fabric (Figure 4.4). The launch and representation of this model smart city project is celebrated with an opening event while most of the ministers attending the opening. In this event, the project is framed as a significant in terms of being a model for future urban development in Turkey. In this regard, this showcasing serves to reinforce the discursive framework of the NTI by promoting narratives of national technological development and visionary urban planning. Through high-profile ceremonies, branding, and the involvement of key political figures, the technology-based strategy of the AKP aims to mobilize public support to state-led interventions in everyday urban life.





**Figure 4.4.** View from the Esenler Smart City Project area (Photo taken by the author)

Furthermore, both phases of the project are represented by Esenler mayor Tevfik Göksu as a good luck (*talih kuşu*) for the citizens (Figure 4.5) by emphasizing that:

"The new Esenler, built in the military zone, is becoming Turkey's first 'Smart City' with its infrastructure, superstructure, and user products showcasing the best applications of technology that add value to life. Smart City Esenler enhances the value of Esenler. In Esenler, everyone will experience the joy of sharing wealth, technology, energy, employment, security, peace, and happiness with all the residents of the district" (Kentim Esenler, p.8).

In the fifth of June 2021, this area is announced as “technology development zone” with the decision of presidency while the images about the project have been shared. In this “technology base” research and development studies for smart city technologies will be carried out to build a technologically example city. In addition, the Minister of Industry and Technology Mustafa Varank stated that "We anticipate that this technology development zone could create over 10,000 direct and indirect jobs in this area. Esenler will become Turkey's first truly smart city."<sup>130</sup>

<sup>130</sup> [Haber | T.C. Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanlığı](#)

# Akıllı Şehir ve Tekno Kentler ile **ESENLER'DE HERKES ZENGİN OLUYOR!**



**Figure 4.5.** The promotion of smart cities

Furthermore, the vision of smart cities aimed at enhancing citizens' quality of life is bolstered by the promotion of the national car production TOGG, which is framed as 'domestic and national pride'. This new electrical vehicle is positioned as a key component of an environmentally friendly and technologically advanced urbanization 'ecosystem.' TOGG is showcased as a symbol of Turkey's commitment to using domestic and national technologies to join the ranks of countries producing zero-emission and high-tech electric vehicles. In this context, the AKP emphasizes its role in positioning Turkey as a leader in environmentally friendly transportation, aligning this effort with the broader objectives of the National Technology Initiative (NTI) and the party's urban development agenda, which seeks to reshape cities as arenas for showcasing state-led 'smart' urbanization policies. This technological agenda goes beyond addressing infrastructural needs, but it frames urban space within the discursive framework of technologically empowered nation infused with narratives of modernization, efficiency, and progress aligned with the objectives of the NTI.

To sum up, the following narratives might be regarded as the ways in which improving public services, local infrastructure, and new urbanization vision is promoted to disseminate the NTI into everyday life:

- **Increasing the livability of urban areas and the quality of life:** The rhetoric surrounding ‘digital governance’ and ‘smart cities’ suggests a progressive agenda to increase livability of urban areas and improve the quality of life while it reflects efforts to engage local scale in alignment with the national agenda on National Technology Initiative around municipalism, with “Municipality from the Heart (*Gönül Belediyeciliği*)” and “True Municipalism (*Gerçek Belediyecilik*)”. Central to this citizen-centered approach is the creation of technologically advanced, efficient, sustainable, and inclusive urban environments.
- **Building the cities of the *Century of Turkey*:** A new urbanization vision is emerging, focused on creating technologically advanced cities, with urban transformation projects designed to facilitate the smart city concept. This narrative, alongside urban transformation projects and mega-projects, highlights the government's commitment to aligning Turkey's urban development with the technological advancements of the National Technology Initiative, particularly in areas like smart cities.

These strategies play a crucial role in translating the NTI's abstract concepts, such as progress, development and the fulfillment of the nation's aspirations, into lived realities. Through urban interventions, technological showcases, symbolic infrastructure projects, the NTI's idealized vision has materialized within the everyday life practices. The discursive framework of the technology strategy of the AKP is reinforced to reshape the socio-spatial dynamics through digitally enhanced daily life. In this sense, a top-down discourse of national advancement is envisaged to be embedded within spatial practices and rhythms of everyday life, reinforcing the legitimacy of the NTI in promoting prosperity and national development while producing urban space in line with the regime's techno-political imaginary.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 explored the discursive construction of the AKP's technology strategy within the overarching framework of the National Technology Initiative by focusing on multi-scalar strategies in global, national and local scales. By analyzing how the NTI is mobilized as a multi-scalar narrative, the chapter illuminated the ways in which technology discourse functions as a key instrument of



the AKP's populist project, linking aspirations of global competitiveness with national pride and localized practices. The following chapter will provide an analysis about the social implications of this technology-based strategy, examining how it is received, contested, or internalized by society. It will also offer a comparative analysis of technology-based strategy within the framework of regime change in 2018 in relation to the AKP's primary urban-based strategy over the party's two decades in power by assessing their strengths, limitations, and socio-political consequences.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF TECHNOLOGY-BASED AND URBAN-BASED STRATEGY**

In Chapter 4, The National Technology Initiative is discussed as a populist strategy of the AKP within the context of regime change in 2018, drawing on the multi-scalar strategies formulated in analyzing global cases in Chapter 2. In this regard, technology discourse has been instrumental in reproducing the AKP's political narrative as part of the regime design within the context of the Presidential Government System with more authoritarian dynamics. This authoritarian populist strategy of the AKP is primarily structured at the national scale around the developmental agenda, aimed at gaining international reputation on the global scale, and disseminating into everyday life at the local scale, all under the direction of a strong leadership of President Erdoğan. The interplay of the populist strategies, each operating at different scales, intertwines 'the leader', 'the party', and 'the nation' around the technology discourse to secure public support.

This chapter aims to provide a new dimension to this discussion by exploring to what extent populist strategy on technology serves to sustain AKP's hegemonic power, which was achieved through urban-based strategy, relying on construction-led growth for nearly two decades while generating consent with redistributive mechanisms with its initial inclusive discourse. Within this context, this chapter focuses on two key objectives. First, it examines the social impact of the technology-based strategy of the AKP shaped around the National Technology Initiative in securing consent. Then, it analyzes the strengths and limitations of the technology-based strategy in sustaining hegemonic power as compared to the urban-based strategy, which was discussed in Chapter 3 by arguing that the urban-based strategy

of the AKP is ‘exhausted’ over the period of two decades to offer economic, social, and political benefits, particularly within the context of economic crisis and requiring the AKP to craft its new narrative within the context of regime change.

To address the objectives of this chapter, in-depth interviews were conducted with a group of key experts and professionals, who follow the societal resonance of political issues as part of their professional activities. Three of the interviewees were the heads of well-established research companies, while two of them were prominent journalists along with an executive from a technology firm and the head of a civil society organization.<sup>131</sup> These semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour each. Inquiries of the interviews revolved around three main themes: (1) *understanding the interviewees’ perspectives on AKP’s enduring electoral success in maintaining power*, (2) *examining how societal perceptions of the AKP have evolved during their tenure*, and (3) *assessing the impacts and acceptance of the technology narrative in society*. Throughout the interviews, the AKP’s previous urban-based strategy was referenced and revisited as a critical point of comparison to contextualize the discussion in parallel with the arguments of this thesis. In this regard, the chapter discusses the results of in-depth interviews with key experts based on the societal resonance of technology-based strategy as well as urban-based strategy. In addition, to provide further insight into the objectives of this chapter, media analysis was incorporated into the discussion.

In the following three sections, first, an overview of the interviewees’ perspective on the AKP’s consolidation of power will be discussed, by discussing how these perspectives relate to the populist technology-based strategy as elaborated in the thesis. Building upon this, the perspective of interviewees on the technology-based strategy will be elaborated to discuss its role in securing consent. Lastly, an analysis will be made by comparing urban-based and technology-based strategy in the concluding section.

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<sup>131</sup> Interviewee 1: The head of a research company

Interviewee 2: The head of a research company

Interviewee 3: The head of a research company

Interviewee 4: A journalist

Interviewee 5: A journalist

Interviewee 6: Executive of a technology firm and head of a civil society organization

## **5.1. Consolidation of Power: Underlying Dynamics in the Formation of the Technology Discourse**

To comprehend the AKP's enduring rule and the role of the technology discourse, interviewees were first asked about the factors that have enabled the party to remain in power for more than two decades. Despite their diverse political and ideological perspectives, interviewees identified several key critical factors contributing to AKP's electoral success, which can be summarized along three axes: (i) generating consent through economic and political benefits, (ii) strong leadership and controlling the narrative, and (iii) authoritarian dynamics.

In terms of generating consent through economic and political benefits, most of the interviewees mention the importance of land rent, massive infrastructure projects, and the role of the construction sector. In this sense, Interviewee 3 mentions the effects of the conditions when the AKP came to power as follows:

“There was an important advantage: the country was very poor. For example, there was a lack of services and investments in urban areas. Every small project you accomplished became highly visible. When you compare those days with today, we can see the difference.”

In addition, Interviewee 1 highlights how the housing provision particularly made the promises of growth, development, and prosperity appear ‘realistic to society’:

“Housing provision generates votes everywhere in the world, and this was one of the AKP's underestimated policies. Especially through urban transformation, while the left in the country romanticized neighborhoods and said, “They're taking our neighborhoods away from us,” Turkey's right promised a significant portion of society—particularly those living in backstreets—a form of wealth through urban transformation. People who lived in neighborhoods and homes were ashamed of; I specifically use this term because certain studies have highlighted this. In particular, young people living in these areas feel the need to hide where they live due to a process that extends from employment discrimination to social exclusion. Urban transformation created both a transfer of capital and a sense of expectation in these areas. The AKP saw significant results from housing policies. When we look at the promises made in most of the general elections, the AKP's past performance in housing made these promises appear realistic to society. During that period, society embraced the housing promise.”

As the above perspectives highlight, the immediate effects of housing production and the advancements in infrastructure in the neighborhoods echoed with society to generate electoral success for the AKP. Urban transformation projects not only facilitated the economic benefits but also addressed socio-spatial dynamics. Whereas another dimension of generating consent through economic benefits is framed as the 'poverty management' as Interviewee 5 highlights how maintaining poverty rather than solving it served for the AKP to secure consent:

"The AKP's capacity to manage poverty is crucial. They made people dependent on the state for survival instead of encouraging them to work and produce. As long as this capacity to manage poverty is sustained, their ability to stay in power also increases. Let me give an example from a personal experience. Someone I knew from our district asked me for help. The government employment agency (İŞKUR) offers 11-month temporary jobs. You work as a laborer in public institutions for less than the minimum wage. This person asked me to help them get such a job, thinking I might have connections. I said, 'You have so much land and gardens. Why don't you cultivate and produce something?' They replied, 'I worked hard before, but the salary I would get from the state is enough for me.' This is the mindset. Or, for example, someone was being considered for a position assisting with patient care but did not want their social security to be paid. Because they were receiving social aid from the state. In my view, this is one of the key dynamics: an institutionalized system of poverty management."

Interviewee 4 also mentions that the 'culture of charity' through social aids serves the AKP to sustain its electoral success. In addition, Interviewee 1 highlights the importance of creating the perception of governing well and the economic benefits in the AKP's earlier years to consolidate their power as follows:

"The AKP leader and his cadre were able to convince society for a long time that they governed the country effectively. The main shift in perception is related to the process of governance itself. Here, too, decisions were largely shaped by economic factors. Additionally, in economics, there's the concept of marginal utility. When they first came to power, the initiatives they implemented generated high marginal utility for society. For example, opening access to private hospitals or providing free textbooks. Over time, however, they were unable to produce the same level of marginal utility. This, in turn, has led to a change in both their vote share and public perception, as well as in the illusion of their ability to govern effectively through active policies."

At this point, it should be noted that most of the interviewees emphasized the constitutive role of the urban-based strategy in the formation and consolidation of AKP's political power, as previously discussed in this thesis. Overall, the perspectives of the interviewees highlight the significance of the economic and political benefits for wide segments of society during the AKP's early years by generating electoral success. In addition, the economic and political benefits reinforced the perception in society that only AKP could govern the country well both economically and politically, which became an underlying dynamic for the AKP to establish its populist strategy on technology. In this sense, Interviewee 3 highlighted the intertwined relation between 'the people' and 'the party' by stating that "people prefer communicating with the AKP and having their problems solved by the party. If the AKP performs its political duties effectively, the public will always stand behind it." Yet, the impact of the recent economic crisis has been emphasized by most of the interviewees, particularly in analyzing the role of the technology narrative and its effect on electoral dynamics, which will be discussed in detail later.

In terms of the second axis of the key political factors contributing to AKP's electoral success, all the interviewees emphasized the importance of the strong leadership by President Erdoğan, particularly his ability to connect with the public, to control the public narrative, and to maintain strong internal solidarity with the AKP's electoral base. In this regard, Interviewee 1 elaborates the AKP being a 'leader-centered party' as follows:

"The biggest distinction of the AKP is that it is a leader-centered party, and the leader at its helm has the power to transform the masses. This transformative power is evident not only in micro-level discussions but also in a broader sociological sense. For example, within the relatively conservative base where it originated, the AKP has increased women's employment. There's a study we conducted with AKP-affiliated women that often gets referenced. It highlights the changes in their lives before and after Erdoğan. Sociologically speaking, Erdoğan has demonstrated a significant transformative power, especially within his own base. One micro-level example is the debate around the statement by lieutenants, 'We are Mustafa Kemal's soldiers.' Initially, 15% opposed it, while 85% supported it. However, eight days after Erdoğan intervened on the matter, the opposition rose to 37%. This reflects the transformative power of leadership. Moreover,

for a meaningful portion of voters, being an AKP supporter or a follower of Erdoğan has evolved from being merely a political preference to almost becoming an identity.”

As this quote highlights ‘the transformative power’ of the party and its leader reinforces the AKP’s electoral power by fostering a sense of identity and belonging to a cause. Establishing this belonging is particularly effective for the AKP in presenting its mega-projects, city hospitals, and infrastructure constructions around the development agenda to foster nation’s power and prestige as illustrated by Interviewee 5 as follows:

“I got into a taxi in Gaziantep, and the driver was telling me enthusiastically about how they built this bridge, the Osmangazi Bridge. I asked him, “Will you ever use that bridge in your lifetime?” He said, “No, I won’t.” Then I asked, “Do you know that you’re still paying for it?” He replied, “Why would I pay for it?” I explained that even if he never crosses it, he is still paying because the government has guaranteed payments to the contractors using taxpayer money for vehicles that don’t pass. “Oh, really?” he said, surprised. It took me half an hour just to explain this mechanism. So, people focus on the final product without considering its actual cost.”

This strategy of the AKP, in creating a sense of identity and belonging to a cause, also flourishes in establishing the technology narrative around the NTI in terms of building the Turkey’s powerful and prosper future together as a ‘nation’ and integrating with the higher-level discourse on the Century of Turkey. Within this framework, the role of Erdoğan is constitutive while also fostering his strong-leadership image. In this regard, Interviewee 3 defines a national cause represented by the AKP and Erdoğan in the context of challenging the hegemony of the Western civilization, by summarizing the general political narrative of the AKP to sustain its power as following:

“When Western civilization established dominance over the past 200 years, they defined their superiority by belittling and disparaging all other nations. They deliberately tried to characterize each country as if it were African. Currently, there is a fascination with Turkey and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan across the Islamic world, among oppressed nations, and around the globe. This fascination stems from three key factors. First, as a non-Western society, Turkey stands out as one of the few countries to have achieved significant development in the last 20 years. Second, this nation carries a historical

mission. At the time of the Republic's founding, given the conditions of that era, our priority was simply to preserve our territory. We had no ambition to exert influence in our surrounding regions. Erdoğan, however, has embraced Turkey's historical mission, reviving it on the global stage. Thus, Turkey has achieved both development and the reclamation of its historical mission. Third, Erdoğan has verbally challenged the Western hegemony—a system that, while indulging in its own luxury, also orchestrates the underdevelopment of other nations. By combining these two elements—development and defiance of Western dominance—Erdoğan and Turkey have become a source of fascination not only for the Turkish people but for nations across the world.”

This perspective of Interviewee 3 also demonstrates one of the most important underlying dynamics in the establishment of the technology-based strategy in emphasizing the fulfillment of a historical mission around the developmental agenda and challenging Western hegemony. As discussed in the thesis, the technology narrative builds upon this core ideological foundation in representing its objectives around the NTI to become a strong, great, and prosper country, to embody the will and aspirations of the nation, to become a global player gaining wealth and prestige. In this context, controlling the public narrative and having rhetorical power is another significant factor for the AKP to influence their voter base as mentioned by many of the interviewees. Interviewee 2 emphasizes the President Erdoğan's capability of 'connecting well with the people' and managing the public opinion effectively through political maneuvering. On the other hand, Interviewee 4 highlights how 'creating an enemy' is always part of controlling the narrative in the context of the authoritarianism and right-wing populism for the AKP:

“Authoritarian and right-wing populism consistently rely on creating an 'other, an enemy, or a demon' to mobilize citizens against. This strategy worked flawlessly for AKP. It is a government that could not function without an internal enemy in any period. They were successful at this, or rather, it was one of the key reasons for their success. Of course, you cannot achieve this alone from where you stand. The domain they quickly transformed, altered, or conquered was the media.”

As above quote also asserts that media power is one of the most influential tools in enhancing the AKP's control on the political narrative. In this regard, interviewees highlight not just the importance of media control but overall authoritarian dynamics in the country and allocating state power as one of the significant factors that led the



AKP to its consolidation of power. Interviewee 4 framed this authoritarian dynamic as ‘the integration of the state and the party’ by mentioning that: “The state and the party have become synonymous; the provider is directly equated with the AKP and its leader. In such a context, this mechanism begins to function in their favor.” Similarly, Interviewee 2 highlights that criticism of the AKP and challenging its rule is equated to challenging the state itself:

“During his 22-23 years in power, Erdoğan has reshaped all major state institutions according to his own design. Anyone who wants to oppose Erdoğan, who wants to challenge him, not only has to confront Erdoğan himself but also the entire state apparatus. Because opposing Erdoğan means opposing the power of the state itself.”

In this regard, the concentration of power in the presidency strengthens the AKP's control by creating a political environment where opposition is not only discouraged but also perceived as a direct threat to state stability. By intertwining the party's identity with that of the state, the AKP positions itself as the guardian of national security, prosperity, and order. In this regard, most of the interviewees highlight that the authoritarian rule allows the AKP to maintain power over key state institutions, the judiciary as well as the media. This combination of coercive control helps the AKP consolidate power, decrease challenges to its authority, and sustain its influence across the political and social life. In addition, interviewees generally mentioned that authoritarian control over state institutions and the media serves political power to promote its populist strategies more effectively by suppressing political challenges. In this regard, it could be claimed that authoritarian rule backed by media power contributes to creating a foundation for the technology-based populist strategy to thrive.

## **5.2. Technology-Based Strategy: Social Impacts**

One of the most significant themes in the interviews was contextualizing the technology narrative in the economic crisis in Turkey, which is also important for this thesis in terms highlighting the juxtaposition of the regime change and the establishment of the technology narrative as discussed in Chapter 3. Despite the

economic crisis, the AKP's ability to remain in power by winning the 2023 general elections was a recurring theme in the interviews. Most of the interviewees mentioned that one of the reasons for this electoral success, achieved in the face of economic, social and political crisis, is the party's strategic use of narratives that align with its voter base, particularly around the defense industry and the national car production TOGG, by supporting the main framework of this thesis.

Within this context, most of the interviewees emphasized that this strategy aligns with the AKP's voter base. It is discussed that the technology narrative functions as a strategic tool to "maintain loyalty" within the AKP's voter base while it "serves to delay the erosion" and "slows down the disengagement" among the AKP voters. In this regard, the technology narrative serves as a unifying discourse that mitigates the impacts of economic discontent and reinforces the perception that the AKP is capable of "addressing and solving the country's problems", in presenting a broader vision for Turkey's future around the National Technology Initiative. On the other hand, some of the interviewees also mentioned that this political strategy impacts the nationalist, conservative, and religious voters from the opposition in shaping their perception about the AKP, Erdoğan, and the new regime.

Several interviewees also highlighted the diminishing effects of the construction-led growth model and its capacity to foster political and social cohesion, particularly in the context of political shift towards a technology-driven narrative. Interviewee 2 mentions that:

"President Erdoğan is doing everything he can in this area (technology) because there's nothing left, he can provide to people through land rents or similar mechanisms. For instance, Kanal Istanbul has no place that will be open to the public. It will be opened to the Arabs. Most of the land there has already been sold."

Similarly, Interviewee 3 underscores the limitations of political strategies centered on rent-based economy, especially housing production, in the AKP's early periods while stating the importance of industrialization and the advancement of high-tech transformation across various sectors in the recent period as follows:

“Pursuing politics solely based on a housing strategy was bound to hit a dead end at some point. For example, let’s say there was economic stagnation. Neither the public nor the private sector could invest in housing. The sector would come to a complete halt. Once I said, during Ali Babacan’s tenure, when there was an abundance of hot money, if we had prioritized a production economy over a rent-based economy with a 51-49 balance, our production today would have been 10 times higher. Think about it this way: it was 50 times more profitable for a factory owner to sell their factory land and convert it into housing. Or take some holdings, for instance... while marketing 850,000 square meters, they were selling it at 22-23 thousand liras per square meter. Seeing this kind of profit, no one would bother with industrial production. The government could have established a better balance there. They could have focused on a production-based economy as early as 2012-2013. They did later on, but partly because of the bottleneck in the defense industry... And that became very valuable. I think that if Turkey establishes good partnerships over the next 10 years, it will make significant advancements in technology.”

Building on the comments above, Interviewee 3 asserts that the National Technology Initiative, even if initially started in the defense industry, should extend to other fields such as AI-based technologies as the NTI is a project like the projects of “the founding period of the AKP”. In this regard, Interviewee 1 mentions the role of the technology narrative as part of the regime design, particularly in commenting about the political actors that are crucial for the National Technology Initiative:

“Erdoğan's approach is not merely about staying in power; it is about designing a regime. Regimes possess certain components: they have strategists, bureaucrats, capital, and media. Erdoğan’s regime is one that has everything. The only thing it lacked was a martyr, and with July 15, it even gained martyrs for this new regime. Therefore, in constructing this regime, including some of the current ministers, individuals nurtured during the AKP era—along with their education abroad—plays a role in the National Technology Initiative.”

In terms of slowing down the erosion of support among AKP voters, technology narrative plays a key role “creating an illusion that makes society feel good” through the promotion of technological advancements by political power. As highlighted by many interviewees, this promotion is closely tied to the notion of national pride and prestige. This thesis also frames national pride and prestige as one of significant themes of the AKP’s technology-based populist strategy, aimed at gaining international reputation on the global scale. This theme emphasized by the

interviewees as a means of securing consent by fostering a collective sense of achievement. Interviewee 1 states that although the Turkey is behind the global technological advancements, the technology agenda of the AKP has become a key motivation for the society to be proud, particularly in the times of economic crisis:

“During periods like this, especially in times of severe economic crises in countries like Turkey, there’s a general sense of despair in society. This also turns into something that damages national pride. Perhaps one of the major reasons behind the rise of Hitler’s Germany was hyperinflation, which contributed to this sense of despair. Similarly, today’s feeling of despair, driven by significant real income losses and the notable impoverishment of the middle-income group in Turkey, is countered by technological initiatives—particularly in the defense industry—which serve as the last major source of motivation.”

This perception of catching up with the international technological race and boosting national pride manifests even in the social media activity as noted by Interviewee 1:

“When analyzing YouTube algorithms, especially in terms of what voters for the AKP and Erdoğan are watching, we see that one of the main motivations is technological advancements, particularly in the defense industry. This has reached a level where, if we consider the company represented by Erdoğan’s son-in-law and focus on him specifically, the public doesn’t perceive him as merely a “favored son-in-law,” as assumed by the opposition. Instead, people view him almost as a national hero, particularly in the case of Bayraktar.”

Similarly, Interviewee 2 shares the result of a survey on public opinion regarding Turkey’s production of UAVs, aircraft carriers, automobiles, and fighter jets, highlighting that many respondents expressed a sense of pride in these achievements:

“Around 70% of people chose the option “I am proud of my state.” The AKP uses it for self-promotion, with 19% agreeing with that. Only 5% believe that unnecessary resources are being spent on these projects...And it’s a tactic that works. For instance, 69% of society says they are proud of their state. Among CHP voters, 45% feel this way; among MHP voters, it’s 94%; and among İYİ Party voters, 62%.”

However, Interviewee 2 points out that the so-called aircraft carrier is not an aircraft carrier; it’s a tanker ship; they docked it at Sarayburnu for public display and was announced as an aircraft carrier as a propaganda tool. On the other hand, Interviewee

4 emphasizes the importance of political right's reliance on promises of restoring an idealized past and drawing references from the past to reinforce the sense of national pride. In this sense, it should be noted that the AKP embodies the will and aspirations of the nation through invoking historical figures and referencing the achievements of the ancestors in promoting the achievements around the NTI as discussed in this thesis.

While this strategy of addressing 'the nation' appears to be embraced by the public to some extent -in fostering national pride, prestige and being proud with the country- many of the interviewees emphasize that this process is established by two key symbolic areas: *the defense industry on the one hand and the national car project TOGG on the other*. The defense industry reinforces the emphasis on national independence and sovereignty through the lens of security, whereas TOGG emerges as a symbol of technology, innovation, and economic development. Both projects are regarded as strategic moves aimed at strengthening the AKP's narrative of national pride and self-sufficiency, in mobilizing public support. In this context, the defense sector and TOGG have become critical instruments for reinforcing the continuity of the new regime, both politically and socially. Interviewee 1 mentions that Erdoğan's wearing of a fighter pilot uniform and orchestrating drones landing on ships during the general election period is no coincidence within this context, by highlighting that Turkey's being competitive globally in defense industry is significant in controlling the public perception:

"It's worth noting that public support plays a role here, as it does worldwide in advancing such technologies. But ultimately, particularly in the defense industry, while it may be misleading to call Turkey "the best," the country has reached a position where it can at least compete. Whether in smaller niches or broader sectors, Turkey is now competitive. Of course, there have been significant losses, like the F-35 project, but in terms of these technologies, Turkey is now in a competitive position. This narrative has largely been embraced by the public."

In terms of controlling the public perception, Interviewee 4 noted that technology narrative is successful as it frequently emerges in his conversations with the public while these conversations revolve around the perceived progress of national

technological projects, such as UAVs and the TOGG. Interviewee 4 mentions that the people often express pride and optimism about Turkey's advancements in technology which serves to delay the erosion among the AKP voters:

“This didn’t just catch my attention; it’s not an ineffective tactic. It genuinely serves to delay the erosion among the groups gathered around the AK Party. For instance, talk to any AKP supporter. Personally, I don’t like engaging with left-wing opposition groups. Living in a small town, most of my acquaintances are AKP or MHP-supporting tradespeople. Speak to them. Slowly, life is pushing them away on one hand, but on the other, if you’re constantly confronted with a terrifying threat, such as Israel, and you’re afraid—yet at the same time, you believe there’s a power capable of confronting that threat—where do you see it? In your state. And what is that state? That state is the AKP, it’s Erdoğan. That has an effect. Your drones, your Hürkuş aircraft, all of it—this government is telling a story. They are telling a story, and the impact of that story is significant.”

As the above quote also emphasizes, by invoking security concerns and showcasing technological achievements like drones and aircraft, the political power frames itself as the defender of the state and the people's protectors, which aligns with its supporters and serves to maintain loyalty to the AKP and its leader. The emphasis on security concerns further strengthens the AKP's appeal for voters as stated by Interviewee 2:

“In Turkey, since the regime cannot use the economy to manage public opinion, it resorts to security narratives like most of the authoritarian regimes. Fear-mongering is the strategy they rely on most. They say, “Look, we are under this kind of threat of Israel.” On one side, it’s the Kurds; on the other, it’s Iran or whatever they claim. Whenever Erdoğan feels cornered, he brings security issues to the forefront. More broadly, whenever governments in Turkey face challenges, they turn to security issues.”

Similarly, Interviewee 5 points out the importance of security concerns and the achievements in the defense industry in presenting an effective strategy to sustain public support. Whereas Interviewee 5 mentions an observation about obtaining UAVs from the USA, which is also one of the most referenced narrative in promoting the NTI by Erdoğan as revealed in this thesis:

“I see this as a propaganda tool. And a very effective one at that. It is effective in several ways; for example, in counterterrorism. Back in 2007,

Turkey was negotiating with the United States to obtain unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). I personally followed Erdoğan's visits during that period. The U.S. allocated 6-7 UAVs, but they were controlled by their own pilots from Incirlik Air Base. Now, if you've progressed from that point to conducting daily operations against PKK groups with UAVs and armed UAVs (SIHAs), and if you've made it impossible for the PKK to operate freely, that's a significant advancement. Selling these to Ukraine or Azerbaijan is also progress. However, what they overlook is that Turkey didn't encounter these technologies for the first time during their administration—these efforts were already underway.”

On the other, when asked whether this strategy was effective in securing consent of society, particularly during the 2023 general elections, Interviewee 5 emphasized the critical role of the media power in promoting the NTI throughout electoral process and how the political authority strategically leveraged media platforms to amplify the narrative surrounding the NTI, presenting it as a symbol of national progress and technological advancement. According to Interviewee 5, by dominating the media space, the government was able to craft a compelling story that aligned with voters, referencing to the ‘so-called’ aircraft carrier in Sarayburnu:

“For example, they built a ship. It's not an aircraft carrier, but they marketed it as one. They docked it at Sarayburnu, and tens of thousands of people came to see it. The government currently controls 80-85% of the media. TRT, for instance, bombarded people with coverage of this. Then there's TOGG, where politicians take photos with it. On the other hand, the drone sent to the Azerbaijan is promoted extensively. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's deputy head of state says, “We bought 500 kamikaze drones from Israel, but only 10 from Turkey.” Yet the narrative makes it seem like Turkey single-handedly reclaimed Karabakh and handed it over to Azerbaijan. At this point, high technology and power display was very effective for society. But also look at the Soviet-era celebrations of World War II victories. Israel has also put on such displays... Authoritarian leaders once showcased ballistic missiles and tanks; now they use high technology for the same purpose. For instance, Netanyahu is an authoritarian leader, isn't he? And the technology he uses in warfare is a symbol of that authoritarianism. But if you're going to stage this kind of propaganda, on the other hand, asking people to contribute 250 TL from their credit cards for an Iron Dome system undermines the narrative.”

As above quote manifests, the ‘propaganda’ of the AKP by using its media power resembles the authoritarian leader's tactics of the past and the present in showcasing the regime's power to control the public opinion and sentiments. According to Interviewee 2, while Turkey is still classified as an electoral autocracy, the election

results matter to comprehend how the populist strategy of the AKP operates. In this regard, he shares the recent survey they made in October 2024, by stating that even if there is a group moving away among the AKP voters since 2023 general elections, there is still a %59 voter base of the party despite the severe economic crisis. He mentions the role of technology narratives in elections as follows:

“Technology propaganda slowed down the detachment of AK Party voters. According to this October 2024 survey, 59% of those who said they voted for the AK Party on May 14, 2023, now say they would vote for the AK Party again. But an interesting point is that 28% are undecided or leaning toward protest votes, and 12% say they won’t vote or won’t go to the ballot box. This shows us that there is a group moving away, but still, 59% remain with the AK Party. Despite all these factors—failures in the economy, education, and agriculture—the AK Party still retains about 60% of its vote. Here, I see the impact of propaganda. It cuts off the effect of people distancing themselves from the AK Party. In the West, a government this unsuccessful would fall below the electoral threshold. But here, it’s still around 30%. This is a cumulative effect. It’s not just about drones, UAVs, airplanes, or TOGG. It is the cumulative effect of all this propaganda that slows down the rate of the AK Party’s erosion.”

As highlighted in this quote, the role of technology narrative in slowing the erosion of support for the AKP is underscored as a key factor in AKP’s continued electoral success. In this context, the cumulative impact of the AKP’s populist strategy extends beyond the defense industry while the national car production TOGG becomes crucial to reinforce loyalty. Interviewee 3 emphasize the symbolic meaning of TOGG as follows:

“The TOGG, which has emerged as the most politically impactful machine to date, carries significant symbolic weight. Consider this: imagine yourself as a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. Two to three hundred years ago, your lands extended deep into Europe, you controlled nearly half of Africa and the entirety of the Middle East. Yet, due to imperialist powers, you were reduced to a state where your nation couldn’t even produce a sewing needle, only capable of manufacturing a simple wood stove. A hundred years later, you now achieve a high-tech product again. There’s a saying about TOGG: it’s “the most touched car in the universe,” meaning it’s received unprecedented attention. I was in Urfa... When TOGG came to the region, wherever it went, it created rally-like crowds. Imagine this: a car comes, and people from towns and villages rush to see it. If TOGG were a person, it would probably be the happiest person in the world, given the immense attention and admiration it has received.”



By framing the AKP's consolidation of power within the context of challenging Western hegemony and fulfilling the developmental agenda of the country, as discussed in the previous section, Interviewee 3 also frames TOGG as an extension of this narrative of reclaiming the country as a great nation once. He emphasizes that, after a prolonged period of perceived technological and industrial stagnation, the development of such a significant technological artifact, TOGG, serves to restore national pride. He also states the importance of the technology narrative in terms of its role in general elections, by highlighting how it is celebrated by society:

“If you notice, during the election, it was the AK Party that brought these topics to the forefront the most. This election almost turned into a defense industry election. In one place, there was the TCG Anadolu, in another, Kaan; elsewhere, other projects like TOGG were showcased. At rallies, TOGG and the defense industry were prominently featured. TOGG impacted the entire country. This is partly because there's curiosity, a sense of being downtrodden, and weariness among the people. On a subconscious level, such productions also serve as a form of defiance, a way of standing up. Pay attention to that. For instance, TOGG captured immense public interest, but now people's expectations have shifted. Right now, there's talk about Kaan, about aircraft. If you were to bring TOGG back into the spotlight, people wouldn't pay as much attention anymore—it was for that moment, and now it's over. Perhaps you could highlight its ecosystem instead—talk about how many engineers work on it, how many side products it has inspired, and what innovations have emerged because of TOGG.”

As this quote demonstrates the success of TOGG relies on fulfilling the people's expectation of progress and development by being relieved from the sense of being defeated. In this regard, TOGG constitutes the key symbolic achievement in the NTI. Interviewee 1 also highlights that the realization of TOGG had a significant impact on bolstering support for the AKP:

“TOGG didn't impact the AKP's votes while it was still a concept. However, the week TOGG rolled off the production line, it created a meaningful increase in the AKP's votes. Once it became tangible, that week saw a slight boost in support for both Erdoğan and his party. Currently, government supporters base their defense arguments primarily on these developments.”

In this regard, the political authority is successfully controlling the public narrative also by investing institutions like the Directorate of Communications, as noted by Interviewee 5. He mentions that through propaganda methods, they have succeeded

in shaping perceptions in people's minds and create a sense of ownership in the public, particularly discussing TOGG:

“For example, someone in a rural village feels proud of TOGG, even though they will likely never drive that car in their lifetime. Moreover, TOGG isn’t even something that belongs to them. It’s a car produced by a consortium of five private companies. Today, just as Fiat, Ford, or Hyundai manufacture cars in Turkey, TOGG operates as a similar entity. Its investors are Turkish businesspeople, but when you look closer, they have partnerships with China for the battery, Italy for the body, and other countries for the engine. So how meaningful is it to call it "domestic and national"? However, the fact that it was developed, designed, and conceptualized here is significant. They managed to instill a sense of ownership in the public. Right now, TOGG is in a difficult position, especially with China’s BYD company planning to invest in Turkey and produce electric vehicles, which is a major blow to TOGG. This issue isn’t currently on the public’s radar.”

Furthermore, in promoting the advancements in defense industry and the national car production as well as the presentation of the other fields around the NTI, President Erdoğan plays a significant role by the help of the state officials and political elites closely linked to the AKP, while perpetuating his strong leadership. Interviewee 5 mentions that the AKP and its political actors actively work to project a cult leader image by mentioning that some practices are consciously utilized by the Directorate of Communications in Turkey, such as Erdoğan’s photo with military uniform:

“These practices aim to cultivate a "cult leader" narrative. Most recently, in one of Erdoğan's speeches, they had him say, "If Gazi Paşa (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) had lived another 10 years, Turkey would be in a completely different place today." What this implies is: if Tayyip Erdoğan stays in power for another 10 years, this country could reach a different point. Gazi Paşa didn’t get this opportunity, but Erdoğan should. This is part of an effort to elevate the leader cult to its peak. The perpetuation of this leader cult manifests in various domains. For instance, the omnipresent image of the leader on screens—this is what we are living. Accompanying this imagery is one of their most heavily utilized symbols, though I’m not sure if it’s still displayed. It’s a photo of Erdoğan in military attire with a navy-blue coat and dark sunglasses. It represents the issue of power and serves as an analogy for methods employed by past authoritarian regimes too.”

In this regard, Interviewee 2 states that strategies on technological agenda plays a crucial role especially for Erdoğan to reinforce his image, as a leader capable of advancing national progress. The technology narrative not only fosters national pride

but also serves as a key element of his deliberate political strategy to sustain visibility, legitimacy, and authority as noted by Interviewee 2:

“Despite all these negative conditions, Erdoğan manages to shield himself from significant political wear and tear. He still maintains 30% support, even though the last 10 years have been a story of failures. The economy had already started to decline around 2012-2013, and the situation became disastrous after the transition to the presidential system. In the presidential election held a year ago, he received 52% of the vote. People are struggling with poverty, yet he still secures 30% of the vote. In this electoral success, Erdoğan’s political intelligence and his use of the security argument are the most influential factors. He is making every effort to protect himself under the umbrella of technology.”

Even if most of the interviewees mentioned that technology-based populist strategy secures consent from the AKP’s voter base, evolving around the themes of national pride, prestige, and strong leadership, some of the interviewees point out that this strategy aims to address the conservative-nationalist voters too. Interviewee 6 highlights that the technology narrative’s primary concern is symbolic, aimed at political gain by resonating with the conservative-nationalist vein. Within this context, TOGG is discussed as being more of a political move rather than addressing practical or technological priorities by referencing the assessments of the manufacturers and businesspeople:

“This topic involves rhetoric to address conservative-nationalist people. When you look at the TOGG issue, rational manufacturers and businesspeople say the following: wrong timing, wrong design, and a flawed supply chain. Therefore, it’s not sustainable. For example, right now, we don’t even know who is responsible for the car service. Or, when the car requires an update, we don’t know how the update should be performed. Issues like these are at play. So, this is more of a political move than technological advancement. It’s a political move because there’s a sensitive chord between conservatism and nationalism, and this strikes that chord.”

Similarly, Interviewee 2 mentions that the populist agenda of the technology initiative aims to appeal to those who already have a close connection or emotional bond with the AKP not the opposition voters. However, he states that it could impact the nationalist, conservative or religious voters from the opposition as “technology is the best tool to keep that group together.”

In this context, the MHP, as the coalition partner of the ruling government, already supports the NTI. The leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli highlights the technological advancements is a growing source of national pride and international influence while emphasizing the importance of the defense industry and drone production in global arena. He states that “*Cumhur Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı)*” guarantees the continuing advancements through the vision on technology and the "Century of Turkey" symbolizes this promise, by also employing the political narrative of the AKP.<sup>132</sup> During the 2025 budget discussions in parliament, the MHP representative also employs the vision of the NTI by highlighting the artificial intelligence strategy, the Digital Transformation Office, and the development of domestically-produced and national satellites as well as promoting the defense industry.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, criticisms of the NTI by political parties generally focus on the government's support for Baykar and its prominent role in the defense industry.<sup>134</sup> In addition, the CHP, as the main opposition party, criticizes the technology narrative of the AKP in terms of not being transparent and competitive. The representative of the party underscores the need to foster a broader, more inclusive ecosystem that benefits a wider range of stakeholders while the advancements in the defense industry are not solely the achievement of the ruling party but the result of the state policies over the years.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, business associations such as Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MUSİAD) and Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) adopts different positions regarding support the NTI. MÜSİAD, known for its close ties to the AKP, tends to align with and actively

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<sup>132</sup> [https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/mhp/5163/mhp/Milliyetci\\_Hareket\\_Partisi\\_Genel\\_Baskani\\_Sayin\\_Devlet\\_Bahceli\\_nin\\_Turkiye\\_nin\\_Ilk\\_Yerli\\_Ucak\\_Gemisi\\_Hizmet\\_Alimiyla\\_ilg.html](https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/mhp/5163/mhp/Milliyetci_Hareket_Partisi_Genel_Baskani_Sayin_Devlet_Bahceli_nin_Turkiye_nin_Ilk_Yerli_Ucak_Gemisi_Hizmet_Alimiyla_ilg.html)

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.benguturk.com/mhpli-bulbul-ulkemiz-kendi-savas-gemisini-yapabilen-10-ulkeden-biri-haline-gelmistir>

<sup>134</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/galeri/ekonomi/babacan-milli-teknoloji-hamlesini-hedef-aldi-selcuk-bayraktar-sert-cikti-kirli-siyasete-alet-edilemez/6>  
<https://www.evrensel.net/haber/403852/veli-agbaba-t3-vakfi-ibbden-destek-almis-dedi-selcuk-bayraktar-reddetti>  
<https://chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-lideri-ve-cumhurbaskani-adayi-kilicdaroglundan-bayraktara-yanit-bu-kadar-siyasallasmayin-sevgili-haluk-bey>

<sup>135</sup> <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/pinar-uzun-okakin-turk-savunma-sanayinin-her-turlu-kazanimini-zimmetine-gecirme-cabasi-tek-kelimeyle-gulunctu>

promote the initiative, viewing it as a crucial driver of national development.<sup>136</sup> In contrast, TÜSİAD, which represents more established and globally oriented businesses, often takes a more critical approach. In the report prepared by TÜSİAD in collaboration with the Informatics Industry Association (TÜBİSAD), titled “A Call to Action for High Technology in Turkey's Second Century,” there is no reference to the NTI or its objectives of domestic and national production. While addressing the theme of “Turkey's Second Century”, it could be claimed that the report avoids adopting the "Century of Turkey" narrative promoted by the AKP. These divergent perspectives reflect broader ideological and strategic positions within Turkey's business community concerning the role of state-driven policies in shaping technological advancement. On the other hand, Fatih Kacır, the Minister of Industry and Technology, criticizes the business community in the light of the recent political turmoil with the representative of TÜSİAD by stating that “Business associations should support Turkey's National Technology Initiative, whose impact is felt at the other end of the world, instead of pointing fingers at politicians elected by the will of the people.”<sup>137</sup>

While also the professional chambers like The Union of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) express their ideological position by emphasizing that the promotion of the technology narrative is not aligned with the broader policies of the AKP to advance technology policy holistically, as follows:

Conditions of disorder, lack of production, unemployment, poverty, insecurity, hunger, and misery have gripped our country. Since the 1980s, the wave of privatization in the manufacturing sector has transferred publicly and collectively owned assets from state control into the hands of capital, exposing them to unchecked exploitation and plunder. Industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, energy, mining, information technology, communications infrastructure, maritime, and the natural environment have come under the grip of neo-colonialism. The AKP's discourse on 'domestic and national technology' aims to obscure these dependency relationships. Liberalization and privatization, along with the dependency of production and

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<sup>136</sup> <https://www.musiad.org.tr/icerik/haber-detay-39/p-2039>  
<https://www.musiad.org.tr/icerik/haber-detay-39/p-1706>  
<https://www.sanayi.gov.tr/medya/haber/teknoloji-ve-sanayi-zirvesinde-imzalar-atildi>

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/bakan-kacir-turkiye-eski-turkiye-degil/3482151>

exports on imported inputs, the subcontracting system imposed by the international division of labor shaped by imperialism, financialization, and the government's deregulation and rent-seeking policies, have led to the deindustrialization of our country.<sup>138</sup>

By also criticizing the Twelfth Development Plan, the union states that there is a clear contradiction between the government's policies that prioritize religious conservatism in education and social life and its goals of advancing science and technology, promoting scientific research, and achieving progress through initiatives like the National Technology Initiative.<sup>139</sup>

To sum up, this section explored the social impacts and reflections of the technology-based populist strategy of the AKP by analyzing the interviews conducted with several key experts. In this regard, most of the interviewees supported the main framework of this thesis by discussing the technology-based strategy of the AKP as a key political strategy established in the face of economic, social and political crisis and contributing to the AKP's authoritarian rule by generating 'limited' consent and electoral success. The discussions mainly revolved around the symbolic role of the defense industry and the national car production TOGG in fostering the national pride and prestige while the strong leadership image of the president Erdoğan highlighted as crucial in representing the populist strategy.

The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the technology-based strategy of the AKP is mostly powerful in addressing the global context in fostering national pride and prestige through technological advancements, which serves as a unifying domain, primarily keeping the party's core base intact. In addition, most of the interviewees highlighted that the technology-based strategy as a key factor preventing AKP voters from drifting away in an environment marked by numerous crises, by the authoritarian populist leader who integrates with the public and manages public opinion through powerful rhetoric. In this regard, the populist strategy on technology pursued by the AKP serves to secure consent particularly among the AKP voters, who represent 'the nation' according to the party's discursive

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<sup>138</sup> <https://www.tmmob.org.tr/belgeler/tmmob-48-donem-calisma-programi>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.tmmob.org.tr/icerik/ikinci-kalkinma-plani-2024-2028-uzerine-tmmob-gorusu>

framework. Whereas some of the interviewees mentioned that this strategy also influences the nationalist, conservative, and religious voters from the opposition.

In conclusion, based on the analysis of the interviews, it could be claimed that AKP's technology-based strategy has generated limited societal consent and has yet to cultivate a broad-based alliance across diverse segments of society. In this regard, it should be considered that it is a relatively new strategy, particularly given its emergence in conjunction with the institutional restructuring following the regime change in 2018. Thus, the technology-based strategy has not managed to establish hegemony; rather than generating widespread consent or unifying strategy, it functions as a mechanism to mobilize party's own voter base. In this sense, it serves to prevent a rupture from the AKP by offering a renewed vision of development, prosperity and national pride. It operates to delay or mitigate the erosion of public support within the context of the ongoing economic crisis.

This also provides to discuss the difference between local and general elections, despite the centrality of technology-based strategies of the AKP around the National Technology Initiative in the AKP's populist electoral discourse. The emphasis on technological advancement remains a core element of the AKP while its effectiveness varies across electoral contexts within the framework of national and local dynamics. In this regard, it could be claimed that technology-based strategy reduces the overall decline in votes or support nationwide—helping the AKP-MHP coalition to mitigate the discontents about the economic crisis and allowing them to maintain its parliamentary majority. However, this strategy is not yet strong enough to shift the balance at the local level, where electoral dynamics are more influenced by concerns specific to the local context. In addition, in opposition-dominated metropolitan areas, technology-based strategy has not been effective enough to alter the power structures or voting distribution. Although the AKP's populist strategy extends to the local scale, it lacks concrete strategies at the local level to engage with the specific socioeconomic needs but projecting the national narratives and symbols, where opposition parties have gained significant power in local level.

This discussion will be elaborated in the following section by comparing the technology-based strategy with the long-established urban-based strategy through

their strengths and limitations to further deepen the discussion about AKP's pursuit of technology-based populist strategy to sustain its hegemonic power.

### **5.3. Urban and Technology-Based Strategy: Sustaining Hegemonic Power**

This section argues that the long-established urban-based strategy of the AKP and its recent strategy on the technology operate on distinct strategic scales. By examining these different scalar manifestations and incorporating interviews' analysis, the urban-based and technology-based strategy is discussed in comparison to explore their limitations and potential to sustain AKP's hegemonic power while their social impacts and reflections on the elections are also examined through this comparison.

Firstly, within the developmental agenda of urban-based strategy, the construction sector holds strategic importance for AKP governments in serving as a key driver of economic growth. As Balaban (2012) highlights that the construction sector's extensive backward and forward linkages with other industries and sectors, including manufacturing, trade, transportation, and services, and finance, leads an interconnectivity and stimulation in economy while governments often assign the sector a central role in their developmental strategy. Since the AKP came to power, the 'construction boom' has become an essential part of economic growth for promoting development and prosperity, significantly transforming the built environment. Also, this strategic focus on the construction sector has become a political instrument, allowing wide segments of society to benefit from redistributive strategies. It has created jobs and employment opportunities for low and middle-income groups while fostering capital networks closely linked to the AKP in reinforcing the party's influence with wealth distribution. This dual benefit highlights the strategic role of the construction sector in addressing the interests of diverse social classes, thereby reinforcing its political and economic significance within the broader framework of developmental agenda at the national scale.

On the other hand, the developmental agenda of the technology narrative flourishes around the promise of economic growth, welfare, and prosperity, through various sectors, as presented within the framework of the NTI.



Yet, this strategy has not developed into a comprehensive model of economic development, expanding to diverse sectors and generating widespread societal impact. Its developmental agenda is narrow in scope and limited to some sectors. In this regard, the dominance of the defense industry is important within the broader technological development agenda while state-led development of the defense industry is prioritized by the AKP governments aligned with their political objectives. In this regard, Interviewee 5 notes that Turkey is behind in achieving a global presence to fulfill the promise of development and prosperity while emphasizing that the party tends to favor those closely aligned with its interests:

“The scenario Erdoğan claims—if we were number one in the defense industry, space technology, artificial intelligence, electronics, and so on—would have tangible outcomes. And that outcome would be a society where the people live in prosperity. Take South Korea, for instance. They are achieving this. Their per capita income is more than three times that of Turkey, and they produce and effectively utilize technology. For example, they apply it in the automotive sector. You look, and South Korean companies dominate one-third of the global automotive market. Or take mobile phones, for instance. We don’t have anything comparable. Even now, when I look at companies where engineers can work—like Havelsan, Aselsan, and similar organizations—they’re primarily focused on military electronics and related areas, many of which were founded long ago. This shows that these initiatives haven’t been as successful as Turkey deserves. There is potential to compete, but there is no merit-based approach. The effort to enrich loyal supporters is very evident. There are numerous companies in Turkey producing unmanned aerial vehicles, but it is as if Baykar is the only one.”

In addition, Interviewee 6 points out that state investments in various technological fields are fragmented, unplanned, and carried out without clear strategies, often driven by political motives, as follows:

“In Turkey, around \$900 million has been invested in the startup and entrepreneurial ecosystem, let’s say in the past year. Let’s assume this has been distributed among 100 companies. Now, if we look at a leading country in the field of entrepreneurship, it has invested \$10 billion, but in just 5 companies. So what happens? You touch many companies with small amounts of money, but at the end of the day, how many unicorns have emerged from Turkey as a result of this support? Zero. Take game companies, for example. There are billion-dollar companies, and the support they received is zero. So how do companies with no support reach this level?

Foreign companies fund them. Now, imagine if these companies could reach a point where they could export from Turkey without being acquired by foreign companies. But this doesn't happen because the ecosystem in Turkey doesn't allow them. The technological investment being highlighted is not at the scale or impact that's being targeted. It's entirely fragmented, unplanned, and carried out without clear strategies. The issue is this: the unintentional distribution of funds. They think they're doing something great. If you ask any ministry, "How many startups has your ministry supported?" They're unaware of the broader context."

Despite the ambitious narratives surrounding technological advancements and development, the economic benefits also remain unevenly distributed, favoring elite groups with close ties to political power not the 'nation' as constantly addressed through the populist strategy of the AKP. In this regard, Interviewee 3 claims that AKP could sustain its electoral support if the low- and middle-income groups could receive 'a share of the pie' from the economic model based on technology as follows:

"The continuation of power ultimately comes down to this: if you transfer a share of the pie to the low-income segments of society and those who have not benefited from this pie, the AK Party can sustain its rule. In other words, it is possible for the AK Party to remain in power through the effective operation of the economic model and by ensuring that low-income groups receive a share of the pie."

On the other hand, the AKP's continued power relies on urban-based strategy in sustaining an economic model that not only drives growth but also ensures the redistribution of resources to low-income groups. By providing economic benefits such as increased employment opportunities, housing provision and social support programs through local governments, the party seeks to secure the loyalty and support of society. This strategy also helps to reinforce the party's image as a protector of the disadvantaged, fostering a sense of inclusion and upward mobility. In this sense, urban-based strategy plays a significant role in economic growth while disseminating the daily lives of society by promoting healthcare facilities, transportation projects, or social-housing mobilization through TOKİ and mortgage markets. In addition, despite the criticism of the urban transformation projects, the immediate effects of housing production and the advancements in infrastructure in the neighborhoods aligned with society to generate electoral success. As mentioned by Interviewee 1 housing provision made the promises of growth, development, and

prosperity appear ‘realistic to society’. By portraying itself as the guarantor of development and growth, the AKP strengthens its populist appeal and hegemonic power, maintaining a broad coalition of support that cuts across different social classes through urban-based strategy. Thus, it could be argued that urban-based strategy are effective and powerful on a local scale in establishing and maintaining a presence in daily life by addressing the immediate necessities.

In contrast, technology-based strategy has struggled to achieve the same level of impact even if the AKP’s populist tactics attempt to disseminate into the local scale, through promoting technology festivals in different cities, high-tech urban transformation with smart cities, or presenting TOGG. This highlights the limitations of the technology narrative at the local level, where it fails to align with the public as deeply as urban-based strategy. In addition, the promises of economic gains and prosperity of technology-based strategy have not yet proven sufficient to generate widespread support.

Within the context of such limitations, the political authority reinforces its developmental agenda on technology through a symbolic dimension that addresses the nation's will and aspirations. By reimagining them within the framework of grandiose visions on “Strong and Great Turkey”, the technology-based strategy seeks to cultivate a sense of national pride and prestige, as discussed in the previous section. This political strategy positions technological advancement not merely as an economic or developmental goal but as a cornerstone of national identity and strength, aiming to mobilize public support by intertwining progress with historical narratives. This approach elevates the party's ability to manage challenges from opposition and criticisms, as it ties its political legitimacy to its capacity to represent the nation in the global order elevating national pride, glory, and prestige through technology narrative.

In addition, the omnipresent image of President Erdoğan heightens in promoting technology-based strategy, it also further deepens the integration of the leader and the ‘nation’ around the populist project. His visibility in high-profile events and projects, such as Teknofest or TOGG, reinforces the populist discourse of national unity and

sovereignty with strong leadership. In this regard, Interviewee 3 compares the openings of the large-scale infrastructure projects and the promotion of TOGG and the development of new aircraft in 2023 general elections both in catching the public attention and sustaining President Erdoğan's electoral campaign as follows:

“For example, take the Zigana Pass, a 13-14 km road that holds a place in the history of this nation. It starts in Gümüşhane and ends in Trabzon. It was mentioned for only five minutes during one of the President's rallies. If you were to look it up on Google, you might wonder how much money was invested in it. Such large-scale infrastructure projects no longer capture the public's interest; people don't really care whether it's there, whether it's open or not. To give an example, even in the areas that benefit most from the Zigana Pass—like Bayburt, Trabzon, and Gümüşhane, or even Rize—it likely influenced less than half a percent or one percent of voters. The same will be true for the Kop Pass in the future. For instance, TOGG captured immense public interest, but now people's expectations have shifted. Right now, there's a talk about Kaan, about aircraft. When you compare today with the past, the massive investment inaugurations by AKP nowadays don't even make the news on television.”

As the quote above illustrates, although it would be an overstatement to claim that urban-based strategy has been abandoned by political authority because of less public interest, there has been a strategic shift to technology-based strategy within the establishment of the new regime. The new regime presented itself as the future of Turkey with a technologically advanced vision. In this regard, technology-based strategy reinforces the discursive construction of the regime's vision while urban-based strategy is powerful in terms of concrete policies. In this process urban and technology-based strategies coexist across distinct strategic scales, operating with interrelated practices to further boost the regime's power. This section explores these dual trajectories while claiming that urban-based strategy is powerful at national development as an economic model and its effects at local. On the other hand, technology-based strategy operates at global scale in promoting national pride, self-sufficiency, and independence. In addition, the technology discourse around the NTI became the key political strategy of the government in search of seeking its hegemonic power within the context of the economic crisis. In this regard, the strengths and limitations of the urban-based and technology-based strategy in sustaining hegemonic power of the AKP could be summarized as follows:

- Urban-based strategy plays a significant role as a key driver of development through rentier economic model, technology-based strategy has not yet evolved into a comprehensive growth model in generating a mechanism such as ‘urban rent’ to foster economic growth and to fulfill the promise of development and prosperity within the context of the economic crisis. In this regard, the economic benefits are also distributed within the limited groups close to AKP, not yet ‘sharing the pie’ with the low- and middle-income groups.
- Urban-based strategy is powerful in both offering economic and political benefits through increased employment opportunities in the construction sector and its related industries, housing provision, infrastructure improvements, social support programs through local governments, and upward mobility. Thus, urban-based strategy is effective on a local scale in establishing and maintaining a presence in daily life by cutting across the interests of different social classes to secure electoral success in turn.
- In contrast, technology-based strategy has limitations in disseminating into everyday life. Even if through improving public services, local infrastructure, and new urbanization vision around smart cities and digital governance is promoted to disseminate the NTI into everyday life.
- However, technology-based strategy operates on a global scale to elevate the national pride, glory, and prestige as well as perpetuating the perception of the nation’s power, through advancements in defense industry, the national car production TOGG, space exploration endeavors which align with the AKP’s voter base to mobilize support and sustain electoral success.
- Technology-based strategy is powerful in perpetuating the image of strong leadership of President Erdoğan operating at all scales, by unifying the leader and ‘the nation’ around the populist project in legitimizing the new regime. In addition, the NTI includes Erdoğan’s active promotion of this vision to sustain the electoral base and legitimize the new regime as he is the ‘maverick’ to further carry the populist project.

In this sense, the technology-based strategy becomes instrumental to reproduce AKP’s populism, particularly effective for AKP voters, while long-established urban-

based strategy becomes the key mechanism in establishing AKP's hegemonic power by fostering broad-based alliance.

This comparison allows us to build upon the argument made in the concluding part of the previous section in discussing the AKP's electoral success in the 2023 general elections and its defeat in the 2024 local elections to the main opposition party CHP. In this regard, it could be claimed that the strength of the technology agenda in addressing the nation's power and reputation at national and global scale became effective in general elections as highlighted by many of the interviewees. However, the limitations of the technology agenda in addressing the local scale affected the loss of the voters in local elections in 2024. While the limited consent among the AKP voters reduces the overall decline in votes or support nationwide, technology-based strategy is not yet strong enough to shift the balance at the local level. In the local governments controlled by the opposition, it has not been sufficiently impactful to shift the balance of power and voting dynamics. In this regard, the interviewees also mentioned that the loss of the local elections in 2024 has diverse political reasons, such as the political change in the main opposition party, the tendency of the public to give warning in local elections, the powerful strategies of the CHP at the local governments won in the previous 2018 local elections. Together with these factors, it could be claimed that the limitations of the technology-based strategy have not impacted the local elections in 2024 as much as it has been effective in general elections in 2023, by keeping the AKP's core voter base intact through its populist political strategy around the National Technology Initiative.

On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 3, AKP's urban-based strategy in establishing its hegemonic power relies on commodifying urban space as aligned with the global dynamics of neoliberal urbanization. The construction sector as the key driver of economic growth also transforms urban fabric through privatization of public lands, urban transformation projects, real estate developments, and large-scale infrastructure projects. Despite the setbacks of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the AKP sustained its hegemonic power through its urban-based strategy until the gradually deepening economic crisis since 2011 general elections. However, the crisis context further deepened within the context of the economic policies of the

Presidential Government System since 2018. Both the global and national crisis further increased the AKP's dependence on construction sector while the crisis context created drawbacks in this sector too, with rising costs, declining investment, decreasing housing prices and sales. These setbacks disrupted AKP's long-standing reliance on construction-led economic growth and supporting public support despite stimulative measures by the AKP.

Within this context, AKP's technology-based strategy within the framework of the regime change has not only enhanced regime's populist narrative around technological development but also facilitated the expansion of new strategies for the commodification and control of urban space. The regime's vision of smart urban transformation around the National Technology Initiative is one of the significant strategies in this process, as discussed in Chapter 4. The NTI also envisages for urban transformation projects to facilitate smart city concept while the new urbanization narrative, alongside these transformation projects and mega-projects, is being actively promoted through political actors as well as the President Erdoğan. By promoting smart cities with large-scale urban initiatives, the new urbanization vision aligns with the broader goals of economic growth and national development. This ongoing transformation represents a shift toward an urban model in which technologically altered cities are positioned as the drivers of economic growth, investment, and global competitiveness. In this regard, the regime instrumentalizes urban space as both a site of economic accumulation and a field for consolidating its technology narrative as the continuation of its neoliberal urbanization dynamics.

In addition, Teknofest plays a central role in the promotion of Anatolian cities by increasing their 'brand value', aligning them with national technological development and progress. This process contributes to enhance the role of the local in the national scale by the integration of the local into the broader ideological framework of the AKP's technology narrative. Teknofest is also organized in symbolically important urban sites that have political importance for the AKP such as the nation's gardens (millet bahçeleri) and airports. These locations are not chosen arbitrarily as they represent the importance of infrastructural developments during the AKP's rule. These strategies serve to reinforce the regime's technology agenda

while spatially producing and maintaining its representation. By organizing Teknofest within these urban sites, the AKP promotes its technology-centered populist strategy while it spatially extends its political project into the urban space. Furthermore, such spatial practices help to maintain the new regime's symbolic representation in the everyday experience of urban citizens. In this regard, Teknofest becomes more than a festival but as a performative field within which urban space reproduced around political and ideological spectacle.

To sum up, although AKP's technology-based and urban-based strategy operate at distinct strategic scales, as discussed in this chapter, their juxtaposition opens new and contested areas to explore the relationship between political power and urban space. This juxtaposition reveals the interplay among these strategies while illuminating how hegemony is embedded in and reproduced through spatial practices, materializing through the production of urban space in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1974; Kipfer, 2002). In this regard, the populist strategy of the AKP centered on technology alters and expands the existing structural dynamics while helping to sustain hegemonic power in generating consent.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This thesis explores the discourse on technology in mobilizing a populist strategy operating within the recent rise of authoritarianism by focusing on Turkey as a case study. It seeks to contextualize technology not as an inevitable developmental force but as a politically and ideologically situated discursive construction, which is employed by authoritarian regimes and leaders to consolidate power and cultivate legitimacy. By focusing on the multi-scalar articulation of technology narratives, the thesis aims to understand how technology becomes embedded in state-led populist imaginaries of progress, modernization, development, national sovereignty, pride and independence.

Within this context, populist discourse is structured around the ideological core of populism, which constructs a dichotomy between the ‘true’ people, who have been excluded and marginalized, and the elite or external enemies (Mudde, 2004; Urbinati, 2019). However, for a populist discourse to become a political strategy, the role of the leader is significant as Weyland (2017) states that populism is fundamentally a top-down strategy that relies on the presence of a leader to identify the ‘unorganized’ people as a unified and ‘rhetorically empowered’ entity. This political-strategic approach frames the populist move as a process of identifying “the people with the leader and then vest in the leader the power emanating from the people” (Weyland, 2017, p.54). In this regard, the thesis explores how authoritarian leaders pursue and sustain political power through social mobilization, as well as ‘the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power’ by employing narratives on technology. In this regard, the global cases, examined in the thesis to scrutinize the role of technology discourse - Hungary, India, and Venezuela, are all electoral autocracies like Turkey, governed by the authoritarian leaders with populist tactics,

respectively Viktor Orban, Narendra Modi, and Nicolas Maduro. Their countries are generally associated with their leader as Urbinati highlights “all populist regimes take ‘the name of the leader’” (Urbinati, 2019, p.113). On the other hand, China represents an exception in terms of not being an electoral autocracy but an authoritarian regime that similarly relies on the leadership of the Xi Jinping in mobilizing a populist discourse centered around technological development (Wang, 2020). These populist autocrats illustrate authoritarian practices that weaken the foundations of democratic governance by limiting the freedom of media, using legal mechanisms to suppress dissent, and marginalizing political opponents. Particularly, their nationalist rhetoric by claiming to challenge ‘Western influence’ on the global stage helps to justify their rule, resulting in the consolidation of power through mobilizing the people around their political strategy.

On the other hand, populism, as a political strategy, should not be analyzed in isolation from the broader power relationships and structures within which it operates. Rather than viewing populism as an autonomous phenomenon, it is essential to situate it within the intersection of social, political, and economic dynamics. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of populism necessitates an examination of how it interacts with and is conditioned by underlying structural factors, including economic policies, shifts in political representation, institutional arrangements, and transformations in global and national political context. In other words, the hegemonic potential of populist discourse emerges from broader societal dynamics and power relations while giving meaning to the people and the leader in the process. Thus, a populist strategy could be constitutive in hegemonic struggles while “the dialectic between hegemony and populism can facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of populist discourse and its implications” (Stavrakakis, 2017, p.535). Understanding populism ‘as an instrument for achieving hegemony’ allows an examination of how populist strategies navigate structural dynamics to either reinforce or challenge existing hegemonic power structures (Yalvaç& Joseph, 2019). In this regard, the thesis discusses populism as a political strategy embedded in the broader political-economic structure.

Building upon this, the thesis situates the political strategy of the populist autocrats centered on the discursive construction of technology in relation to the rise of authoritarianism within the crisis of neoliberal hegemonic project. Particularly, the legitimacy crisis alongside the economic and political crisis after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis created fertile ground for populist autocrats to channel the growing public discontent and rising socio-economic inequality (Adaman et al., 2019, Altınörs & Akçay, 2022). Within the framework of authoritarian neoliberalism, it is argued that the crisis has not led to neoliberalism abandonment but rather to its entrenchment through more authoritarian means by mobilizing the institutional power and the more coercive mechanisms by the growing dominance of central governments around the framework of ‘executive centralization’ in 2010s (Bruff, 2014; Jessop, 2016; Bruff & Tansel, 2019). This includes the implementation of austerity policies, the weakening of social policies, the promotion of financial liberalization, along with the concentration of executive power. Furthermore, with the promises of national glorification and nostalgia for greatness, authoritarian leaders promote developmentalism with populist tactics that secures consent for their rule of in the face of the intensifying economic, social, and political crises (Arsel et al., 2021).

Within this framework, the populist autocrats deployed national sentiments and a resurgence of nationalistic rhetoric in their political strategies, particularly technological advancement constituting one of the key pillars of this discursive framework. Technology discourse serves the political agenda of populist autocrats, in terms of representing modernization and progress while entrenching to consolidate power and influence the public sphere. The analysis of global cases helps to formulate the analytical framework of the thesis by presenting multi-scalar strategies which aim to enhance international reputation in competitive global dynamics, advance national developmentalist goals, and extend to local practices and everyday life. As the thesis argues, the deployment of multi-scalar strategies around technological advancement is instrumental to foster the populist discourse of the authoritarian leaders, despite the variation in geopolitical contexts and domestic challenges. These leaders embody similar strategies in engaging with technological development by emphasizing narratives of development, modernization, nationalism,

global leadership, wealth, and prestige through ‘rhetorically empowering’ ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ within the context of hegemonic struggles.

At this point, The Turkish case presents a significant point of analysis to examine the role of technology discourse within the context of authoritarianism. Over the past two decades, Turkey has undergone a significant transformation under the AKP governments as ‘the implementer of a neoliberal roll-out program’ by embracing pro-market regulations (Bayırbağ, 2013, Bedirhanoglu et al., 2020; Erensü & Madra, 2020). This transformation was particularly relied on the construction sector, which became the key pillar of AKP’s growth strategy and a central mechanism for redistributive strategies in generating consent through urban rent and consolidating its hegemonic power. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), which impacted the construction-driven growth model by gradually exposing the fragility of the AKP’s urban-based strategy while AKP governments relied more on the construction sector to sustain their hegemonic power. However, redistributive strategies sustained by urban rent have begun to fail in delivering the promises of development and prosperity within the context of the ongoing social, political, economic crisis, revealing the limits of the construction-led growth. In response to the deepening crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic project and the social and political turmoil at the national level, authoritarian dynamics within the Turkish political landscape intensified. During this period, the AKP, which had initially risen to power through a inclusive and pluralistic populist discourse, began to shift its strategy. Rather than relying on the broad-based alliance, the AKP focused on consolidating support from some segments of society, that aligned with its ideological and economic agenda. At the same time, The AKP employed coercive strategies to manage other groups while the initial promise of inclusion and giving way to repressive practices aimed at maintaining political dominance (Özen, 2020; Yalvaç & Joseph 2019).

In this context, the thesis argues that the regime change in 2018 from parliamentary to presidential system marked the emergence of a new discursive field through which the AKP legitimizes its rule within the growing challenges to its hegemony. In particular, the party’s technology-based populist strategy has become a central mechanism to maintain its political dominance within the crisis of its construction-

led accumulation regime and the erosion of urban-based consent, which underpinned its rule. As the limits of the construction-led economic growth became visible, marked by financial instability and rising public discontent, the AKP shifted toward a symbolic and ideological emphasis on technology to reproduce its populist influence. This shift highlights how populist discourse in Turkey has gradually evolved in response to internal crises and changing global dynamics, using technology not only as a symbol of progress but also as a strategic tool to reinforce authoritarian rule under the discursive construction of national development. In this regard, technology has emerged as a tool for economic growth as well as a central symbol in the AKP's populist narrative, grounded in nationalist vision around geo-political autonomy, self-sufficiency, national pride and the vision the 'Century of Turkey.'

Analyzing this shift within the context of the regime change and its evolving discourse through the Turkish case reveals how authoritarian regimes reproduce their narratives in response to changing political economic conditions while using technology to legitimize authoritarian rule and construct a unifying national identity embedded within a populist strategy around technological development. On the other hand, the case of Turkey is significant in terms of exploring the AKP's technology-based strategy in continuity with its long-standing urban-based strategy to explore its strengths and limitations by situating populist project to broader social, political, and economic dynamics in sustaining hegemonic projects (Stavrakakis, 2017; Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019)

The research explores the technology discourse of the AKP in relation to its authoritarian rule in the period starting from the regime change in 2018, by framing it as a populist political strategy (Weyland, 2001). It investigates how the technology-based populist strategy of the AKP continues to mobilize electoral support after two decades in power while developing new narratives to legitimize the authoritarian rule at the juncture of social, political, and economic crisis. Within this framework, the thesis frames the National Technology Initiative as the embodiment of the AKP's populist strategy to mobilize support, consolidate power, and legitimize the new regime. The National Technology Initiative, as the core of the technology-based strategy, spans various fields, fostering institutional changes, and promoted by the

key agents of political authority. The thesis examines the NTI through the multi-scalar articulation of its strategies, focusing how it operates at local, national, and global scales to reinforce the authoritarian rule.

To explore the interpretations and meanings associated with technology, the research systematically collects and analyses the data derived from a variety of sources, including key policy documents, development plans, election manifestos, as well as the public speeches delivered by key political figures and news coverage from 2017 to 2024 to capture the interplay between policy, public discourse, and technological development over time. In this regard, content analysis helps to organize specific themes, concepts, and narratives within the data while critical discourse analysis provides linking rhetoric and narratives structures within the broader ideological context (Hajer, 1993). The research also incorporates insights from expert interviews to discuss the social impacts and reflections of the technology-based strategy.

Based on the themes organized by deploying scale as an analytical tool after scrutinizing the world cases: *(i) developmentalism, (ii) strong leadership, (iii) international reputation, and (iv) dissemination into everyday life*, the thesis concludes that the technology-based strategy of the AKP structured at the national scale around the developmental agenda, aimed at gaining international reputation on the global scale, and disseminating into everyday life at the local scale, all under the direction of a strong leadership of President Erdoğan. Within the context of the Presidential Government System, the technology-based strategy of the AKP has played a crucial role in reproducing its political narrative as part of the regime design. Meanwhile, the multi-scalar interplay of the populist strategy intertwines ‘the leader’, ‘the party’, and ‘the nation’ around the agenda of the National Technology Initiative, further strengthening the AKP’s relation with its voter base as Urbinati (2019) highlights populism “is an ideology based on trust through faith more than trust through free and open deliberation (and thus also dissent) among the followers, and between them and the representative” (p.122).

Building on the outcomes of *developmentalism*, it is concluded that the narrative on the NTI represented the main developmental logic as a vision, guide, and a roadmap

for the diverse fields such as the digitalization of public services, research on artificial intelligence, space exploration, smart cities alongside with the national car production and the defense industry. The ideological core of this representation is nourished by the nation and the welfare of its people around economic growth and prosperous Turkey as Urbinati (2019) points out the fundamental premise of populism is ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’.

Particularly in promoting economic growth through technological transformation, the ‘underdevelopment’ is emphasized prior to AKP governments, within which transforming the nation to technologically driven society is envisioned. In addition, President Erdoğan and AKP officials address their achievements as compared to the previous periods, especially referring to ‘the entire history of the Republic’. This rhetoric of the political authority heightened in contrasting their ‘progressive’ mentality to accomplish technological advancements, as well as promoting their holistic approach to development.

In addition, the narrative on development is also nurtured by embodying the nation’s will and aspirations, by aligning them with the agenda of the NTI. The ‘new era’ framed around the NTI in 2018, elevated to the *Century of Turkey* in 2023, while the national will and aspiration are defined with the broader discourse of AKP’s vision for a “Strong and Great Turkey” and “Fully Independent Turkey”, where ‘local and national’ production is essential. In this regard, as Weyland (2017) asserts the supply-side of populist project, AKP’s populism could be situated as a ‘top-down strategy’ in contrast to embodying popular discontents. While populism is not tied to any specific ideology but is instead a discursive framework (Laclau, 2005), the reimagining/ redefining nation’s will and aspirations and invoking historical references in terms of being ‘the heirs of a great civilization’ fosters the discursive framework of developmental agenda on technology.

The outcomes of *strong leadership* demonstrate that the implementation of the NTI includes Erdoğan’s active promotion of this vision to sustain the electoral base and legitimize the new regime as he is the ‘maverick’ to further carry the populist project. In this regard, the portrayal of Erdoğan as the visionary guide of the NTI by the

AKP's key political actors reinforces and promotes the image of strong leadership. In this regard, the populist strategy of strong leadership entangles with the image of Erdoğan and the nation as well as the new regime and the achievements in national technology, as Weyland (2017) asserts that the very essence of populism and the typical populist move is to identify rhetorically empowered people with the leader, and then vest in the leader the power emanating from the people (p.54). In addition, the emphasis on the indispensable role of the leader is strategically positioned as a foundation to foster a 'people-enemy division', while simultaneously bypassing the enemies of the nation to actualize the vision of the NTI. In this regard, emphasizing the sabotage against the past and current achievements is the repetitive rhetoric framed by mentioning 'the so-called elite mindset', a vague enemy referred to as 'those,' or the actors of the old Turkey.

Based on the results related to *international reputation*, it can be concluded that the AKP aims to position Turkey as 'a global game-changer beyond being regional power' by attracting foreign investment in high-tech industries, fostering investor-friendly policies, and enhancing its business environment. Central to this strategy is the pursuit of economic independence through breakthroughs in critical technologies under the National Technology Initiative. Political independence is also emphasized, with a focus on self-sufficiency and preserving national interests through domestic technology production. In this regard, the defense industry is highlighted as the cornerstone of both economic and political independence, serving as a driving force for high-tech leadership and national security, and bolstering Turkey's international reputation. In addition, producing and exporting national technology is promoted not only for enhancing the economic and political standing on the global stage but also to promote national pride and sentiment. The rhetoric surrounding NTI seeks to empower citizens by linking technological advancements directly to national strength and autonomy. In this context, a populist strategy elevates national sentiment by encouraging the Turkish nation to take pride in its technological advancements. This approach leverages rhetoric aimed at foreign countries, with slogans like 'The crazy Turks are coming' and 'We used to wait at their doors,' underscoring a shift in power dynamics and national confidence.



On the other hand, the populist strategy focused on the NTI goes beyond promoting national pride and enhancing international reputation; it aims to embed itself in the daily lives of citizens to secure broad electoral support. In this context, the outcomes of *dissemination into everyday life* demonstrate that the AKP aims to create a social mobilization by positioning Teknofest as a 'symbol event' for the NTI, in fostering the role of Anatolian cities. At the same time, this symbolic act serves as a tool for local political agents to enhance the 'brand value' of their cities. In addition, the agent of the 'new era' is defined as 'Teknofest Generation', portraying the youth as the bearers of the nation's future through the National Technology Initiative.

The dissemination of the NTI in everyday life is also promoted through narratives focused on improving public services, local infrastructure, and a new urbanization vision. Central to this effort is the emphasis on increasing urban livability and quality of life through the rhetoric of 'digital governance' and 'smart cities,' which aligns local initiatives with the national NTI agenda under concepts like "Municipality from the Heart" and "True Municipalism" of the AKP. Additionally, a new urbanization vision is promoted to create technologically advanced cities, within the broader goals of the NTI. By embedding and promoting smart technologies into ongoing urban transformation mobilization continues to reinforce the narrative of new urbanization vision of AKP while aligning it with the broader goals of economic growth and national development. This political strategy represents a shift toward a technologically altered urban model.

While adopting multi-scalar strategies helps in the dissemination of the political authority's populist technology agenda, the thesis also argues that the narrative on technology functions as a strategic tool to preserve voter loyalty within the AKP's support base, drawing on the analysis of the key expert interviews. In this regard, state-led promotion of technology agenda helps to postpone the voter disengagement by mitigating the impacts of social, political, and economic crisis. It reinforces the perception that the AKP is competent in addressing and solving the country's problems by framing Turkey's future through the National Technology Initiative. The interviewees discussed the technology-based strategy of the AKP as a key political strategy established in the face of economic, social and political crisis and

contributing to the AKP's authoritarian rule by generating 'limited' consent and electoral success. The analysis of the interviews reveals that the AKP's technology-based strategy is particularly effective in engaging with the global context, using technological advancements to bolster national pride and project a sense of prestige while it serves as a unifying discourse, primarily reinforcing the party's voter base and ensuring their continued support. In addition, the portrayal of President Erdoğan's strong leadership emerges as a key element in reinforcing and sustaining the populist strategy as Weyland (2017) asserts that populism is a 'top-down strategy' necessitating a leader to identify the people.

Within this framework, most of the interviewees agree upon the importance of the urban-based strategy of the AKP around land rent and the construction sector, enabling the promises of growth, development, and prosperity to appear realistic to society, which also has been supported by poverty management and social aid in establishing AKP's enduring rule. In addition, some of the interviewees highlighted that 'the transformative power' of the party and its leader reinforces the AKP's electoral power by fostering a sense of identity and belonging to a cause. As discussed in this thesis, this continuing strategy also flourishes in establishing the technology narrative around the NTI in terms of building the Turkey's powerful and prosper future together as a 'nation' and integrating with the higher-level discourse on the Century of Turkey.

On the other hand, urban-based strategy has become hegemonic in generating consent across broad segments of society, based on powerful economic dominance in the construction sector. The AKP cultivated consent from wide segments of society with the redistributive strategies maintained by the land rent through the housing sector, urban development, mega-projects and infrastructure projects, in establishing the party's hegemonic power. In contrast, technology-based strategy has so far been able to address only certain segments of society, namely the AKP voters and nationalist, conservative, and religious voters from the opposition, by offering a symbolic vision of Turkey's future centered around technological advancements. However, its reach has been limited and providing economic benefits to the ruling power's close allies, tied to the national technology agenda.

The comparison between the tech-based and urban-based strategy of the AKP provides a deeper understanding of how the technology-based strategy and urban-based strategy operate at distinct scales. While the urban-based strategy is effective on a local scale in establishing and maintaining a presence in daily life by cutting across the interests of different social classes to secure electoral success in turn. In contrast, technology-based strategy has limitations to expand in everyday life, even if some strategies are deployed by the AKP while technology-based strategy operates on a global scale to elevate the national pride, glory, and prestige as well as perpetuating the perception of the nation's power, through advancements in defense industry, the national car production TOGG, space exploration endeavors which aligns with the AKP's voter base to mobilize support and sustain electoral success. Additionally, it plays a pivotal role in reinforcing President Erdoğan's strong leadership, intertwining 'the leader' and 'the nation' within the populist project. By promoting the NTI, Erdoğan not only legitimizes the new regime but also strengthens his image as Turkey's visionary 'maverick' leader to secure electoral success and political dominance.

Within the framework of this comparison, the thesis also concludes that the technology-based strategy becomes instrumental to sustain AKP's electoral success in the 2023 general election within the context of the severe economic crisis, particularly effective for AKP voters. The interviewees also mentioned that the technology agenda in addressing the nation's power and reputation at national and global scale became effective in 2023 general election, as the AKP's election campaign built around the promotion of the technology agenda. However, technology-based strategy is not yet strong enough to shift the balance at the local level, particularly in shifting the balance of power and voting dynamics in the local governments controlled by the opposition. Thus, the limitations of the technology agenda in addressing the local scale affected the loss of the voters in local elections in 2024 while the loss of the local elections in 2024 has diverse political reasons, such as the political change in the main opposition party, the tendency of the public to give warning in local elections, the powerful strategies of the CHP at the local governments won in the previous 2018 local elections. Overall, the technology-based strategy have not impacted the local elections in 2024 as much as it has been

effective in general elections in 2023, by keeping the AKP's core voter base intact through its populist political strategy around the National Technology Initiative.

In addition, the comparison between the tech-based and urban-based strategy allows to discuss how the regime's populist narrative around technological development also facilitates the expansion of new strategies for the commodification and control of urban space. The regime's vision of smart urban transformation around the National Technology Initiative, Teknofest in the promotion of Anatolian cities by increasing their 'brand value' and organizing Teknofest in symbolically important urban sites for the AKP, such as the nation's gardens (millet bahçeleri) and airports, play a central role in establishing new strategies to align urban space with the broader goals of economic growth and national development. These spatial practices embed the new regime's symbolism into everyday urban life while representing a shift toward a technologically altered urban model. Thus, the populist strategy around the technology agenda also instrumentalizes urban space as both a site of economic accumulation and a new area to sustain its hegemonic rule.

Overall, the dynamics of reproducing 'the nation' and 'the people' through the AKP's populist strategy, structured at the national scale around the developmental agenda, aimed at gaining international reputation on the global scale, and disseminating into everyday life at the local scale, all under the direction of a strong leadership of President Erdoğan, serve to mobilize the AKP's voter base and legitimize authoritarian rule of the new regime within the context of economic, social, and political crisis. The multi-scalar interplay of the populist strategy intertwines 'the leader', 'the party', and 'the nation' around the agenda of the National Technology Initiative, further strengthening the AKP's relation with its voter base, based on "trust through faith more than trust through free and open deliberation among the followers, and between them and the representative" (Urbinati, 201, p.122). On the other hand, the AKP's populist narrative becomes more authoritarian with a division between the 'people' aligned with the AKP and the rest of the 'people' (Yalvaç&Joseph, 2019; Özen, 2020) through its technology-based strategy in contrast to its inclusive rhetoric based on urban-based strategy. Meanwhile, the reproduction of the symbolic depiction of 'the nation' and 'the people' shifts from one epitomized

by mega projects, infrastructural transformation, and urban transformation to technologically enhanced one; within which the national car TOGG is on the roads, ready to conquer Europe, the first Turkish astronaut and the national satellites conquering space, the national ships, tanks, and drones ensuring national security both internal and external, the cities are transformed with cutting-edge technology while science and technology are supported through extensive R&D, fostering technological entrepreneurship; overall Turkey is transforming into a digital and technologically empowered nation. However, the long-term success of the National Technology Initiative—intertwined with the leader, the party, and ‘the nation’—in securing public support remains subject to challenge by deliberative counterstrategies relying on democratic norms.

By examining post-2018 Turkey as a case study following the regime change, the thesis offers a critical analysis of the role of technology discourse as a populist strategy within the context of authoritarianism through its multi-scalar articulation. The thesis primarily relies on critical discourse analysis to examine data derived from key policy documents, national development plans, election manifestos, public speeches by prominent political figures and media coverage, and in-depth interviews with key experts. This approach provides a detailed understanding of how political narratives and rhetoric are constructed and mobilized to sustain authoritarian rule. Future research could build on this framework by extending the scope of the research through comprehensive fieldwork to incorporate the social reflections of technology-based strategies in various segments of society. While the thesis focuses on political rhetoric and narrative structures, future research could also enrich the analysis by incorporating the material effects of the technology policies to broaden this framework.

In addition, the analytical framework organized through scrutinizing the world cases could be expanded by exploring the multi-scalar dynamics of techno-populist strategies in other national contexts. Also, comparative studies between Turkey and other countries, such as Hungary and Russia, could also shed light how technology discourse adapts to different contexts. On the other hand, this thesis focuses on state-led strategies within an authoritarian context while the multi-scalar strategies in

engagement with technological development could be also analyzed in relation to how local, national, and global actors interact in shaping and contesting technology-driven narratives in authoritarian contexts in engaging with state-power. For instance, investigating how municipal governments, private sector actors, and international organizations contribute to or resist the central government's technonationalist agenda could uncover the complex power relations embedded within these discourses by focusing them specifically.

Furthermore, analyzing Turkey as a case study offers valuable insights for the trajectory of authoritarianism in the country and the role of political discourse in reinforcing authoritarian dynamics. This approach contributes to broadening the analytical framework for understanding the evolving authoritarian landscape in the country, particularly situating discourse as a central mechanism of legitimation and control. Future research could expand on these findings by examining how technology-based strategies are disseminated across various fields while shaping spatial practices, institutional frameworks and state-led policies. Such research could further illuminate the mechanisms within which authoritarian regimes consolidate power and manufacture consent.

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## APPENDICES

### A. DOCUMENTS ANALYZED

1. AKP document titled “*Our Decision is Yes: The Presidential Government System*” for 2017 referendum
2. AKP 2018 Election Manifesto
3. AKP 2023 Election Manifesto
4. AKP 2019 Local Government Manifesto
5. AKP 2024 Local Government Manifesto
6. 9th Development Plan (2007-2013)
7. 10<sup>th</sup> Development Plan (2014-2018)
8. 11<sup>th</sup> Development Plan (2019-2023)
9. 12th Development Plan (2024-2028)
10. 2023 Industry and Technology Strategy
11. The Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology Strategic Plan 2018-2022
12. The Ministry of Industry and Technology Strategic Plan 2019-2023
13. The Ministry of Industry and Technology Strategic Plan 2020-2024
14. 2024-2028 The Ministry of Industry and Technology Strategic Plan 2024-2028
15. Techno-Entrepreneurship Strategy
16. The National Space Program Strategy Document 2022-2026
17. The National Space Program Strategy Document 2022-2030
18. The Ministry of Environment and Urbanization Strategic Plan 2015-2017
19. The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Strategic Plan 2019-2023
20. The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Strategic Plan 2024-2028
21. National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2023
22. National Smart Cities Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2030



23. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure Strategic Document 2014-2018
24. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure Strategic Document 2017-2021
25. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure Strategic Document 2019-2023
26. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure Strategic Document 2024-2028
27. The Undersecretariat for Defense Industries Activity Report 2015
28. The Secretariat of Defense Industries Strategic Plan 2019-2023
29. The Secretariat of Defense Industries Strategic Plan 2024-2028
30. Ministry of National Defense Activity Report 2023
31. National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Document 2021-2025



## **B. CURRICULUM VITAE**

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

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### **EDUCATION**

#### **2017-2025 Ph.D. Degree**

Department of Urban Policy Planning and Local Governments

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

Thesis Title: The Role of Technology Discourse in Authoritarianism and  
Populism: The Case of Turkey After 2018

#### **2009-2012 M.F.A Degree**

Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design

Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

Thesis title: Considering low and middle income group projects of  
Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) from a social sustainability  
perspective: The case of Temelli Social Housing Project

#### **2004-2008 B.A. Degree / full scholarship**

Interior Architecture and Environmental Design

Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

### **WORK EXPERIENCE**

#### **2014-still Interior architect / Managing partner**

So Design, Ankara, Turkey

**2012-2013** Teaching assistant  
Bilkent University Furniture Design Studio of Serpil Altay

**2008-2012** Interior architect / Project manager  
Designon, Ankara, Turkey

### **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Chamber of Interior Architects of Turkey, Member  
Momentum Youth Network Association, Board member  
Bayramiç Yeniköy Ecological Life Association, Member

### **LANGUAGES**

Turkish: Native  
English: Fluent

### C. TURKISH SUMMARY / TRKE ZET

Bu tez, Trkiye'yi rnek bir vaka olarak ele alarak, otoriterliēin son dnemdeki ykseliŖi baēlamında teknoloji syleminin roln incelemektedir. Tez, teknolojiyi kaınılmaz bir ilerleme olarak deēil, otoriter liderlerin baŖvurduēu poplist bir strateji erevesinde Ŗekillenen sylemsel bir alan olarak ele almaktadır. Bu erevede, teknoloji, otoriter rejimlerin ve liderlerin iktidarlarını pekiŖtirmek ve meŖruiyet saēlamak iin kullandığı, siyasi ve ideolojik olarak Ŗekillendirilen bir alan olarak deēerlendirilmektedir. Tez, teknoloji zerine kurulan anlatıların, devlet nclēundeki farklı leklerdeki stratejiler zerinden, kalkınma, modernleŖme, ulusal egemenlik, ulusal gurur ve baēımsızlık gibi tahayyllerle nasıl kurumsallaŖtığını ve meŖrulaŖtırıldığını anlamayı hedeflemektedir.

Trkiye rneēi, otoriter rejimlerde teknoloji syleminin roln analiz etmek iin zgn bir zemin oluŖturmaktadır. Son yirmi yılı aŖkın sredir, Trkiye AKP hkmetleri dneminde nemli bir dnŖm geirmiŖtir. Bu baēlamda, tez Trkiye'de Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hkmet Sistemi'ne geiŖle birlikte 2018 sonrası dneminin, rejim tasarımı baēlamında AKP'nin poplist stratejilerinde bir dnŖm noktası temsil ettiēini ve zellikle teknolojiye ynelik siyasi ve ideolojik bir vurgunun ne ıktığını iddia etmektedir. Bu sre, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin (AKP) kent temelli stratejisi zerine kurulan hegemonyasının zlŖ ve otoriterleŖme sreciyle birlikte iktidarın poplist syleminde yaŖanan deēiŖimle iliŖkili biimde ele alınmaktadır. Bu doērultuda araŖtırma, AKP'nin teknoloji sylemini 11. Kalkınma Planı'nda (2019-2023) aıklanan "Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi" zerinden otoriter ynetim baēlamında ele almakta ve bunu poplist bir siyasi strateji olarak tartıŖmaktadır. Yeni rejim Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi erevesinde siyasi sylemini teknoloji stnden kurgularken, partinin baŖtaki demokratik ve kapsayıcı olan poplist sylemi, zamanla AKP ile zdeŖleŖen 'halk' ile geri kalan 'halk' arasında bir ayırım yaratan daha otoriter bir biime evrilmiŖ ve yeni rejim 'millet'i teknoloji merkezli bir poplist sylemle, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hkmet Sistemi zerinden

şekillenen güçlü liderlik çerçevesinde yeniden tanımlayarak halk desteğini sağlamayı hedeflemiştir. Bu süreçte, popülist stratejinin çok ölçekli etkileşimi, "lideri", "partiyi" ve "milleti" Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi gündemi etrafında birbirine bağlayarak AKP'nin seçmen tabanı ile olan ilişkisini daha da güçlendirmiştir.

Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin (AKP) siyasi mekanizması, yirmi yılı aşkın süredir değişen siyasal-ekonomik stratejiler aracılığıyla iktidarını sürdürmektedir. Bu mekanizma, hem siyasi anlatıların çeşitliliğine hem de neoliberal ekonomik politikaların sürekliliğine dayanmakta olup; bu iki unsur diyalektik bir şekilde işleyerek birbirini güçlendirmektedir. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan liderliğindeki AKP, seçim desteğini güvence altına alarak iktidarını sürdürmek için siyasi anlatılarını stratejik olarak şekillendirmiştir. Özellikle genel seçim dönemlerinde öne çıkan bu siyasi anlatılar, demokratikleşme vaadi ve askeri vesayetle hesaplaşmadan, "Yeni Türkiye" inşasına, ekonomik büyüme ve kalkınmanın teşvik edilmesine, ulusal gururun ve ulusal güvenliğin güçlendirilmesine kadar geniş bir yelpazeye yayılmaktadır. Bu anlatılar, AKP'nin halkı ve milleti algılanan düşmanlara karşı temsil etme biçiminde ortaya çıkan popülist mantığının özünü derinleştirmeye hizmet ederken; AKP'nin popülist iktidarı, özellikle yeniden dağıtım mekanizmaları yoluyla neoliberal politikaların yarattığı hoşnutsuzlukları giderme çabalarıyla daha da pekiştirilmektedir.

Bu bağlamda, inşaat odaklı büyüme modeli AKP'nin neoliberal popülist projesinde yeniden dağıtım stratejilerini destekleyen temel itici ekonomik gücü olmuştur. Ayrıca, kent mekânının metalaştırılmasına dayanan inşaat odaklı büyüme, AKP'nin hegemonik iktidarının tesisinde temel bir rol oynamıştır. Konut sektörü, gayrimenkul geliştirme, mega projeler ve altyapı yatırımları üzerinden sürdürülen kentsel rant aracılığıyla uygulanan yeniden dağıtım stratejileri sayesinde, toplumun geniş kesimlerinden rıza üretilmiştir (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021; Balaban, 2011; Cavoşoğlu & Strutz, 2014; Penpecioğlu, 2016; Şengül, 2015; Yeşilbağ, 2016). Özellikle, AKP'nin kent temelli stratejisinin kapsayıcı söylemi, manevi ve ekonomik kurtuluş yoluyla ulusal bir yenilenme vaadinde bulunarak bir umut siyaseti yaratmış ve Türk toplumunun geniş kesimlerine etki etmiştir (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, p. 2). Bu bağlamda, mega projeler ve altyapı yatırımları ile konut politikaları, kalkınma,

ilerleme ve ulusal yenilenişi teşvik ederek AKP'nin popülist anlatısını destekleyen mekanizmalar olarak önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Ancak, başlangıçta kapsayıcı bir söylemle şekillenen AKP'nin hegemonik gücü, kamusal alanların özelleştirilmesine ve çevresel ile toplumsal kaygılar pahasına gerçekleştirilen altyapı genişlemelerine karşı ortaya çıkan çevre hareketleri ve Gezi Parkı Protestoları gibi toplumsal itirazlarla da karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Bu protestolar, AKP'nin iktidarına yönelik muhalif sesleri bastırmak amacıyla baskıcı önlemler uygulamasına yol açmıştır.

Bunlara paralel olarak, AKP hükümetleri ve Erdoğan liderliği, 2013 sonrası yapısal krizle birlikte ekonomik zorluklar, güç bloğundaki iç mücadeleler ve azalan siyasi destekle belirginleşen bir otoriterleşme sürecine girmiştir (Bedirhanoğlu, 2022; Akçay, 2021). Ekonomideki gerileme, ABD Merkez Bankası'nın (FED) 2008 Küresel Finansal Krizi sonrasında parasal genişlemeyi yavaşlatma niyetini açıklamasıyla başlamıştır (Bedirhanoğlu, 2022). Küresel bağlamdaki bu kriz, AKP'yi ekonomik büyümeyi sürdürmek için inşaat sektörüne daha fazla bağımlı hale getirmiştir. Ancak hem küresel hem de ulusal düzeyde yaşanan ekonomik kriz, inşaat sektörünü artan maliyetler, azalan yatırımlar ve düşen konut fiyatları ile olumsuz etkilemiştir. Bu ekonomik zorluklar yalnızca ekonomik büyüme dinamiklerini sekteye uğratmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda işsizliği artırarak, gıda, enerji ve konut fiyatlarının yükselmesiyle ekonomik eşitsizlikleri derinleştirerek sosyal ve siyasi krizleri de şiddetlendirmiştir (Balaban, 2019). Bu bağlamda, 'inşaat patlaması' ile şekillenen AKP'nin kent temelli kalkınma gündemi, toplumsal ve siyasal bütünlüğü sağlama kapasitesini giderek yitirmiştir. Kentsel rantla sürdürülen yeniden dağıtım stratejileri, devam eden toplumsal, siyasal ve ekonomik kriz ortamında kalkınma ve refah vaatlerini yerine getirmekte yetersiz kalmaya başlamış; bu da inşaat odaklı büyümenin sınırlarını gözler önüne sermiştir. Öte yandan, Gezi Protestoları sürecinde zaten kırılmaya başlayan AKP'nin kent temelli stratejisinin kapsayıcı söylemi, "bir kesimin rızasını kazanarak diğerlerine yönelik zor kullanımını meşrulaştırmaya dayanma" (Özen, 2020, s.14) açısından da giderek daha sınırlı hale gelmiştir.

Çoklu krizi çözme amacıyla, 2018'de gerçekleşen rejim değişikliğiyle birlikte güç yoğunlaşması ve otoriter dinamikler daha da pekiştirilmiştir. AKP ve MHP koalisyonu, 2017'de yapılan anayasa referandumunu kazanarak Türkiye'nin

parlamenter sistemden başkanlık sistemine geçişini sağlamıştır. Yeni rejime geçiş, Erdoğan'ın 2018 seçimlerini kazanmasıyla tamamlanmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi, devlet yapısı üzerindeki kontrolü artıran bir 'otoriter çözüm' işlevi görmüştür (Akçay, 2021). Sonuç olarak, yeni yönetim yapısındaki merkezileşme ve yürütme yetkilerinin genişletilmesi, Türkiye'de Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi altında otoriter bir rejimin kurumsallaşmasının temel unsurlarından biri olmuştur.

Tez AKP'nin kent temelli stratejisi üzerine kurulan hegemonyasının çözülüşü ve otoriterleşme süreciyle birlikte iktidarın popülist söyleminde yaşanan değişim çerçevesinde, 2018 sonrası dönemin, rejim tasarımı bağlamında AKP'nin popülist stratejilerinde bir dönüşüm noktası temsil ettiğini ve özellikle teknolojiye yönelik siyasi ve ideolojik bir vurgunun öne çıktığını iddia etmektedir. Tez, yeni rejimin siyasi söylemini, modernleşme, kalkınma, refah, ulusal egemenlik ve gurur gibi unsurlar etrafında inşa edilen devlet öncülüğündeki popülist bir tahayyül aracılığıyla, teknolojik ilerleme üzerine kurduğunu savunmaktadır. Yeni rejim 'millet'i teknoloji merkezli bir popülist söylemle, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi üzerinden şekillenen güçlü liderlik aracılığıyla yeniden tanımlayarak halk desteğini seferber etmeyi hedeflemiştir.

Ayrıca tez, teknoloji söyleminin, otoriter gücün pekiştirilmesini sağlamak ve iktidarı meşrulaştırmak amacıyla devlet ile parti arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırarak araçsallaştırıldığını iddia etmektedir. Otoriter rejim siyasi söylemini teknolojiye dayandırırken, AKP'nin başlangıçta demokratik ve kapsayıcı olarak sunulan popülist söylemi, zamanla AKP ile özdeşleşen 'halk' ile geri kalan 'halk' arasında bir ayrım yaratan daha otoriter bir biçime evrilmiştir (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019). Öte yandan, AKP, kentsel stratejisini tamamen terk etmiş değildir; aksine, ortaya çıkan teknoloji temelli strateji, artan toplumsal huzursuzluk, büyüyen muhalefet ve özellikle rejim tasarımı bağlamında, AKP'nin popülist projesini yeniden üretmek ve uyarlamak için işlevsel hâle gelmiş ve hegemonik gücünü sürdürmenin bir aracı olmuştur.

Tez, 11. Kalkınma Planı'nda (2019-2023) açıklanan “Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi”ni (MTH), yeni rejimi meşrulaştırmak ve seçim desteğini artırmak için kullanılan

otoriter popülist bir strateji olarak çerçevelendirmektedir. Erdoğan'ın 23 yıllık iktidarı boyunca dile getirdiği ve Türkiye'nin sağcı siyasi geleneklerine dayanan bir hedef olmakla birlikte, MTH, teknolojik kalkınmanın kapsamını genişletmiştir. Bu bağlamda, MTH, çeşitli alanlara yayılmış, kurumsal değişimleri teşvik etmiş ve 2018'den itibaren önemli siyasi aktörler tarafından aktif olarak desteklenmiştir. MTH, Erdoğan ve diğer siyasi figürler tarafından Türkiye'nin güçlü ve bağımsız bir ulus olma hedefinin "vizyonu, kılavuzu, yol haritası, ruhu ve özü" olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu politika çerçevesinde savunma sanayii, yerli otomobil üretimi, sanayi üretimi, uzay araştırmaları, yapay zeka ve akıllı şehirler gibi alanlar AKP'nin siyasi stratejisinde öne çıkmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, tez, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi'ni AKP'nin destek mobilizasyonunu sağlamak, iktidarını pekiştirmek ve yeni rejimi meşrulaştırmak için geliştirdiği popülist stratejinin somut bir yansıması olarak ele almaktadır. Teknoloji temelli stratejinin merkezinde yer alan Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi, çeşitli alanlara yayılmakta, kurumsal dönüşümleri teşvik etmekte ve siyasi otoritenin kilit aktörleri tarafından aktif olarak desteklenmektedir. Tez, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi'ni çok ölçekli stratejileri üzerinden analiz ederek, yerel, ulusal ve küresel düzeylerde otoriter yönetimi nasıl güçlendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır.

Bu bağlamda, tezin kuramsal çerçevesi, otoriter liderler tarafından yönlendirilen bir siyasi strateji olarak popülizm tartışmaları üzerinden şekillendirilmiştir ve AKP'nin teknoloji söylemine dayalı popülist stratejisi farklı ülke örnekleriyle ilişkili olarak analiz edilmiştir. Otoriter popülist stratejiler ile teknolojik kalkınma vurgusu arasındaki ilişki yalnızca Türkiye'ye özgü değildir; 2008 Küresel Finansal Krizi sonrası neoliberalizmin meşruiyet krizine ve dünya çapında derinleşen sosyo-ekonomik dönüşümlere paralel olarak, otoriter yönetimler teknolojik kalkınmayı siyasi araç olarak kullanmışlardır (Akçay, 2021; Jessop, 2016). 2008 küresel ekonomik krizinin ardından neoliberal kapitalizmin meşruiyet krizini aşmak için teknolojiye yapılan siyasi ve ideolojik vurgu giderek öne çıkan bir olgu haline gelmiş ve sağ popülist liderler tarafından daha fazla yönlendirilmiştir. Otoriter liderler, toplumsal hoşnutsuzluktan faydalanarak halkların korku ve şikayetlerini istismar etmiş, aynı zamanda teknolojik gelişimi zenginlik, refah, uluslararası prestij ve rekabetçi küresel düzende ulusal yeniden doğuşla ilişkilendirmiştir. Bunu, tarihsel ve



coğrafi bağlamlarına bağlı olarak farklı derecelerde, ya iktidarlarını pekiştirmek ya da yönetimlerini sürdürmek amacıyla kullanmışlardır.

Popülist söylem, popülizmin ideolojik çekirdeği etrafında yapılandırılmaktadır; bu çekirdek, dışlanmış ve marjinalleştirilmiş "hakiki" halk ile elitler ya da dış düşmanlar arasında kurulan bir ikili karşıtlık üzerine inşa edilir (Mudde, 2004; Urbinati, 2019). Ancak, popülist bir söylemin siyasal bir stratejiye dönüşebilmesi için liderin rolü kritik önemdedir. Weyland'ın (2017) belirttiği üzere, popülizm temelde yukarıdan aşağıya işleyen bir stratejidir ve dağınık, örgütsüz halkı retorik olarak güçlendirilmiş birleşik bir kimlik olarak tanımlayacak bir lidere ihtiyaç duyar. Bu siyasal-stratejik yaklaşım, popülist hamleyi, “halk ile lideri özdeşleştirme ve ardından liderin halktan kaynaklanan gücü bünyesinde toplaması” süreci olarak çerçeveler (Weyland, 2017, s.54). Bu doğrultuda tez, otoriter liderlerin teknoloji anlatılarını kullanarak toplumsal seferberlik yoluyla siyasal iktidarı nasıl sürdürdüklerini ve “iktidarı kazanma ve kullanma yöntem ve araçlarını” nasıl şekillendirdiklerini incelemektedir. Ayrıca, popülist otokratlar tarafından benimsenen daha geniş stratejileri temsil eden bu yöntem ve araçlar, analitik bir araç olarak ölçek kavramı üzerinden incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, ölçek kavramı, bilgi üretmek ve her bir ölçeğin çeşitli iktidar yapıları içindeki ilişkisel doğasını incelemek için bir soyutlama aracı olarak ele alınmaktadır (Bayırbağ, 2006). Teknoloji söyleminin çok ölçekli eklemlenişini inceleyen tez, belirli stratejilerin ulusal, küresel ve yerel ölçeklerde nasıl devreye sokulduğunu ortaya koyarken; her bir ölçeğin diğerleri için kurucu rolünü, süregiden ekonomik, siyasal ve toplumsal oluşumlar üzerinden vurgulamaktadır.

Tezde teknoloji söyleminin rolünü analiz etmek üzere ele alınan küresel örnekler — Macaristan, Hindistan ve Venezuela — tıpkı Türkiye gibi otoriter liderler tarafından popülist taktiklerle yönetilen seçimli otokrasilerdir. Bu ülkeler sırasıyla Viktor Orban, Narendra Modi ve Nicolas Maduro tarafından yönetilmektedir. Urbinati'nin de vurguladığı gibi, bu ülkeler genel olarak liderleriyle özdeşleşmiştir; zira “tüm popülist rejimler ‘liderin adını’ taşır” (Urbinati, 2019, s.113). Öte yandan Çin, seçimli bir otokrasi olmamakla birlikte, Xi Jinping liderliğinde teknolojik gelişme etrafında şekillenen popülist bir söylemi harekete geçiren bir otoriter rejim olarak istisnai bir örnek teşkil etmektedir (Wang, 2020). Bu popülist otokratlar, medya

özgürlüğünü kısıtlayarak, muhalefeti bastırmak için yasal mekanizmaları kullanarak ve siyasi rakipleri marjinalleştirerek demokratik yönetişimin temellerini zayıflatan otoriter pratikleri gözler önüne sermektedir. Özellikle, küresel ölçekte “Batı etkisine” karşı durduklarını iddia eden milliyetçi retorikleri, halkı kendi siyasi stratejileri etrafında seferber ederek iktidarlarını pekiştirmelerine olanak sağlamaktadır.

Ayrıca, popülizm bir siyasi strateji olarak, daha geniş toplumsal, ekonomik ve siyasi dinamiklerle ilişkili biçimde tartışılmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, popülist stratejilerin mevcut iktidar yapılarını nasıl pekiştirdiği ve aynı zamanda teknolojiye dair anlatılar yoluyla “iktidarı kazanma ve kullanma yöntemlerini ve araçlarını” nasıl devreye soktuğunu incelemeyi mümkün kılmaktadır. Öte yandan, bir siyasi strateji olarak popülizm, güç ilişkileri ve yapılarından bağımsız olarak analiz edilmemelidir. Popülizmi özerk bir olgu olarak görmektense, onu toplumsal, siyasi ve ekonomik dinamiklerin kesişiminde konumlandırmak esastır. Bu nedenle, popülizmin kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılması, onun temel yapısal etkenlerle, ekonomik politikalar, siyasi temsildeki değişimler, kurumsal düzenlemeler ve küresel ve ulusal siyasi bağlamlardaki dönüşümler dahil olmak üzere, nasıl etkileşime girdiğini ve bu etkenler tarafından nasıl şekillendiğini incelemeyi gerektirir. Başka bir deyişle, popülist söylemin hegemonik potansiyeli, halkı ve lideri anlamlandırma süreciyle birlikte, daha geniş toplumsal dinamikler ve güç ilişkilerinden doğar. Bu bağlamda, popülist bir strateji hegemonya mücadelelerinde kurucu bir rol oynayabilir ve “hegemonya ile popülizm arasındaki diyalektik, popülist söylemin ve onun sonuçlarının daha kapsamlı bir analizini mümkün kılabilir” (Stavrakakis, 2017, s.535). Popülizmi “hegemonya elde etmenin bir aracı” olarak anlamak, popülist stratejilerin mevcut hegemonik güç yapılarını pekiştirme ya da bunlara meydan okuma sürecinde yapısal dinamiklerde nasıl yön bulduğunu incelemeyi sağlar (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019). Bu çerçevede tez, popülizmi daha geniş bir politik-ekonomik yapıya gömülü bir siyasi strateji olarak ele almaktadır.

Bu doğrultuda tez, popülist otokratların söylemsel olarak inşa ettikleri teknoloji merkezli siyasi stratejilerini, neoliberal hegemonik projenin krizinin çerçevesinde artan otoriterlik bağlamında konumlandırmaktadır. Özellikle, 2008 Küresel Finansal Krizi sonrasında yaşanan meşruiyet krizi ile birlikte derinleşen ekonomik ve siyasi

kriz, artan toplumsal hoşnutsuzluk ve yükselen sosyo-ekonomik eşitsizlikleri popülist otokratların kendi lehlerine çevirebilmeleri için verimli bir zemin oluşturmuştur (Adaman vd., 2019; Altınörs & Akçay, 2022). Otoriter neoliberalizm çerçevesinde, bu krizin neoliberalizmin terk edilmesine değil, aksine, 2010’larda ‘yürütme merkezileşmesi’ ekseninde merkezi hükümetlerin artan hâkimiyeti aracılığıyla kurumsal güç ve daha baskıcı mekanizmaların seferber edilmesiyle neoliberalizmin daha otoriter yollarla kökleşmesine yol açtığı ileri sürülmektedir (Bruff, 2014; Jessop, 2016; Bruff & Tansel, 2019). Bu süreç, kemer sıkma politikalarının uygulanmasını, sosyal politikaların zayıflatılmasını, finansal serbestleşmenin teşvik edilmesini ve yürütme yetkisinin yoğunlaştırılmasını kapsamaktadır. Ayrıca, ulusal yücelme vaatleri ve büyüklük nostaljisiyle otoriter liderler, ekonomik, sosyal ve siyasi krizlerin derinleştiği bir ortamda popülist taktiklerle kalkınmacı politikaları teşvik ederek iktidarlara için rıza üretmeyi başarmaktadırlar (Arsel vd., 2021).

Bu noktada, Türkiye örneği, otoriterlik bağlamında teknoloji söyleminin rolünü incelemek açısından önemli bir analiz alanı sunmaktadır. Son yirmi yılda Türkiye, AKP hükümetleri altında ‘neoliberal yayılma programının uygulayıcısı’ olarak piyasa yanlısı düzenlemeleri benimseyerek önemli bir dönüşüm geçirmiştir (Bayırbağ, 2013; Bedirhanoğlu vd., 2020; Erensü & Madra, 2020). Bu dönüşüm özellikle inşaat sektörüne dayandırılmış; bu sektör AKP’nin büyüme stratejisinin temel direği ve kentsel rant üzerinden rıza üretimi yoluyla hegemonik gücünü pekiştirmeye yönelik yeniden dağıtım stratejilerinin merkezi bir mekanizması haline gelmiştir. 2008 Küresel Finansal Krizi, inşaat odaklı büyüme modelini etkileyerek AKP’nin kentsel temelli stratejisinin kırılganlığını giderek daha fazla görünür kılarken, AKP hükümetleri hegemonik güçlerini sürdürmek için inşaat sektörüne daha fazla bağımlı hale gelmiştir. Ancak, kentsel rant üzerinden sürdürülen yeniden dağıtım stratejileri, devam eden sosyal, siyasal ve ekonomik kriz bağlamında kalkınma ve refah vaatlerini yerine getirmekte yetersiz kalmaya başlamış ve inşaat odaklı büyümenin sınırlarını gözler önüne sermiştir. Neoliberal hegemonya projesinin derinleşen krizi ve ulusal düzeydeki toplumsal ve siyasal çalkantılar karşısında, Türkiye’nin siyasal yapısındaki otoriter dinamikler yoğunlaşmıştır. Bu dönemde, başlangıçta kapsayıcı ve çoğulcu bir popülist söylemle iktidara gelen AKP, stratejik bir değişime gitmiştir.

Geniř tabanlı ittifaklara yaslanmak yerine, ideolojik ve ekonomik gündemiyle örtüřen toplum kesimlerinin desteęini pekiřtirmeye odaklanmıřtır. Aynı zamanda, dięer toplumsal grupları kontrol altına almak için zorlayıcı stratejilere bařvurmuř; bařlangıçta vaat edilen kapsayıcılık yerini, siyasal egemenlięi korumayı hedefleyen baskıcı uygulamalara bırakmıřtır (Özen, 2020; Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019).

Bu bağlamda tez, 2018 yılında parlamenter sistemden başkanlık sistemine geçiřle gerçekteřen rejim deęiřiklięinin, AKP'nin hegemonya krizine karřı iktidarını meřrulařtırmak amacıyla yeni bir söylemsel alanın ortaya çıkıřına iřaret ettięini savunmaktadır. Özellikle partinin teknoloji temelli popülist stratejisi, inřaat odaklı birikim rejiminin krizi ve bu rejimi destekleyen kentsel rızanın ařınması karřısında siyasal egemenlięini sürdürmenin merkezi bir aracı haline gelmiřtir. İnřaat odaklı ekonomik büyümenin sınırlarının, finansal istikrarsızlık ve artan toplumsal hořnutsuzlukla görünür hale gelmesiyle birlikte, AKP popülist etkisini yeniden üretmek amacıyla teknolojiye yönelik sembolik ve ideolojik bir vurguya yönelmiřtir. Bu dönüşüm, Türkiye'deki popülist söylemin içsel krizlere ve deęiřen küresel dinamiklere yanıt olarak nasıl evrildięini ortaya koymakta; teknolojiyi yalnızca ilerlemenin bir simgesi deęil, aynı zamanda ulusal kalkınma söylemi çerçevesinde otoriter yönetimi pekiřtirmeye yönelik stratejik bir araç olarak kullanma biçimini gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu bağlamda teknoloji, yalnızca ekonomik büyümenin bir aracı deęil; jeopolitik özerklik, kendine yeterlilik, ulusal gurur ve 'Türkiye Yüzyılı' vizyonu etrafında řekillenen milliyetçi bir tahayyül içinde, AKP'nin popülist anlatısının merkezi bir simgesi olarak öne çıkmıřtır.

Türkiye örneęi üzerinden rejim deęiřiklięi ve bu sürece eřlik eden söylemsel dönüşümün analiz edilmesi, otoriter rejimlerin deęiřen siyasal ve ekonomik kořullara yanıt olarak kendi anlatılarını nasıl yeniden ürettiklerini; teknolojiyi otoriter yönetimi meřrulařtırmak ve teknolojik kalkınma etrafında řekillenen popülist bir stratejiyle bütünleřtirilmiř bir ulusal kimlik inřa etmek için nasıl kullandıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Öte yandan, Türkiye örneęi, AKP'nin uzun süredir sürdürdüęü kentsel temelli stratejiyle süreklilik içerisinde ele alınan teknoloji odaklı stratejisinin gücünü ve sınırlarını incelemek açısından da önemlidir. Bu stratejiyi daha geniř toplumsal,

siyasal ve ekonomik dinamikler bağlamında konumlandırarak, popülist projenin işleyişine dair daha kapsamlı bir anlayış sunmaktadır.

Bu bağlamda, tez, Türkiye'nin otoriter siyasi yapısını popülizm perspektifinden ele alarak, bu yapının teknoloji alanındaki yansımalarını analiz etmek suretiyle akademik literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, bu tartışmayı küresel bağlamda otoriter rejimlerle ilişkilendirerek geniş bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Ayrıca, Türkiye örneğini daha geniş küresel dinamikler içinde konumlandırarak, bu tartışmayı küresel bağlamdaki otoriterlik ile ilişkilendirmeyi; teknolojinin, popülist söylemler aracılığıyla otoriter yönetimi meşrulaştırmak ve halk desteği ile rıza sağlamak için nasıl araçsallaştırıldığına dair özgün ve benzer örüntüleri vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda tez, teknoloji anlatılarının, çok ölçekli stratejiler aracılığıyla devlet öncülüğündeki popülist modernleşme ve kalkınma vizyonu ile nasıl bütünleştiğini incelemektedir.

Bu doğrultuda, tezin araştırması, 2018'de Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi'nin başlangıcından 2023 seçimlerine kadar olan sürece odaklanmaktadır. Araştırma, teknoloji söyleminin Türkiye'deki otoriterlik bağlamında popülist bir strateji olarak nasıl şekillendiğini, retorik ve anlatı yapıları üzerinden incelemeye odaklanacaktır. 2018'de Başkanlık Hükümet Sistemi'nin tanıtılmasıyla başlayan dönemi ve 2023 seçimlerini kapsayan süreçte, teknolojiye dair anlatıların, siyasi otoriteyi meşrulaştırmak, milliyetçi hayalleri pekiştirmek ve halkın duygularına hitap etmek amacıyla nasıl kullanıldığını araştırmaktadır. Teknolojinin otoriter bir bağlamda popülist bir strateji olarak söylemsel inşasını incelemenin yanı sıra, araştırma aynı zamanda halkın teknolojiye dair popülist stratejiyi nasıl algıladığını, bu stratejinin toplumsal yansımaları açısından ne ölçüde uyumlu ya da karşıt olduğuna dair bir tartışma sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Bu dönemde teknoloji söyleminin şekillendirilmesinde siyasi ve ideolojik dinamikleri anlamak için, tezin temel metodolojik yaklaşımı, yorumlayıcı bir perspektifi benimseyerek içerik analizi ve eleştirel söylem analizi gibi çeşitli nitel araştırma yöntemlerini kullanmaktır. Ontolojik açıdan, yorumlayıcı pozisyon özcü bir anlayışa karşıdır. Marsh ve Furlong (2010), bu gelenek içinde çalışan

araştırmacılar için “toplumsal fenomenlerin bizden bağımsız olarak anlaşılamayacağını; aksine, bu fenomenlere dair yorumlarımızın ve anlayışlarımızın doğrudan sonuçları etkilediğini” belirtmektedir (s.199). Bu doğrultuda, araştırmada içerik analizi ve eleştirel söylem analizinin bir arada kullanımıyla yorumlayıcı bir çerçeve oluşturulacaktır. Her ne kadar farklı felsefi temellere dayansalar da, bu iki yöntem birbirini tamamlayarak farklı bakış açıları sunabilir (Hardy vd., 2004). İçerik analizi, teknoloji anlatısının siyasi aktörler tarafından devlet yapısı içinde resmi olarak nasıl inşa edildiğine dair içgörüler elde etmek için belirli temaları, kavramları ve anlatıları kategorize etmeye yardımcı olacaktır. Eleştirel söylem analizi ise veriyi, otoriterlik ve popülist siyasi projeler bağlamında daha geniş bir çerçevede değerlendirmeyi sağlayacaktır.

Söylem analizi farklı disiplinler çerçevesinde kullanılmaktadır ve her disiplinin kendine özgü kavramsallaştırmaları bulunmaktadır (Hajer, 1993; van Dijk, 1997). Bu çalışmada, söylem analizine politik ekonomi perspektifinden yaklaşılabilecektir, çünkü bu yaklaşım, ideolojik bağlamda retorik ve anlatı yapılarının rolünü öne çıkarmaktadır (Hajer, 1993). Öte yandan, Fairclough (2013), “söylemin belirli güç ve tahakküm ilişkilerini sürdürmeye katkı sağladığı ölçüde ideolojik olduğunu” belirtmektedir (s.15). Bu çerçevede, eleştirel söylem analizi “söylemi ve söylemin diğer toplumsal unsurlarla (güç ilişkileri, ideolojiler, kurumlar, toplumsal kimlikler ve kültürel değerler) ilişkisini” incelemeye odaklanmaktadır (Fairclough, 2013). Bu bağlamda, retorik, anlatı yapıları ve dil, güç yapılarının söylemsel oluşumlar aracılığıyla nasıl inşa edildiğini ve meşrulaştırıldığını ortaya koyduğu için eleştirel söylem analizinin merkezinde yer almaktadır. Söylem, hem yerel hem de küresel, toplumsal ve kültürel bağlamın kurucu bir parçası olarak ele alınmalı, analiz ise “makrodan mikro düzeye (konuşma, metin, bağlam, toplum) ve tersi yönde” hareket etmelidir (van Dijk, 1997). Bu noktada, anlatıların “boşlukta” oluşmadığını, tarihsel bağlam, siyasi oluşumlar, güç ilişkileri ve kurumsal yapı ile bağlantılı olduğunu vurgulamak önemlidir (Hajer, 1993). Anlatılar, “kamusal anlatılar içinde inşa edilmiş ve bu anlatılar aracılığıyla şekillendirilmiştir” (Jessop, 1997).

Araştırmayı küresel bağlamda konumlandırmak amacıyla, önce otoriter popülist stratejileri dünya örnekleri üzerinden inceleyerek, bu stratejilerin gücü pekiştirmede,

kamusal söylemi şekillendirmede ve destek mobilize etmede teknolojiyle nasıl ilişki kurduğunu ele almaktadır. Bu örnekler, teknolojinin siyasi ekonomik bağlam içinde nasıl araçsallaştırıldığında hem ortak hem de özgün örüntüleri vurgulamaktadır. Dünya örneklerini inceleyerek, Türkiye örneğinde otoriter popülizmin teknolojiyle ilişki kurma biçimini analiz etmek için ölçek kavramı bir analitik araç olarak kullanılarak bir analiz çerçevesi oluşturulmaktadır.

Türkiye’de 2018’den itibaren teknolojiyle ilişkilendirilen anlam ve yorumları incelemek için, araştırma, temel politika belgeleri, kalkınma planları ve seçim bildirimleri de dahil olmak üzere çeşitli kaynaklardan veri toplayacak ve analiz edecektir (Bkz. Ek A). Bu kaynaklar, teknoloji anlatısının evrimini ve siyasi otoritenin belirlediği stratejik öncelikleri izlemek açısından kritik öneme sahiptir. Ayrıca, kilit siyasi aktörler tarafından yapılan kamusal konuşmalar da incelenecektir. Bu konuşmalar, teknolojiyi çevreleyen retorik ve söylemin içeriğini analiz etmek açısından değerli içgörüler sunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, 2017-2024 yılları arasında medya haberleri analiz edilerek politika, kamuoyu söylemi ve teknolojik gelişmeler arasındaki ilişki ortaya konacaktır. Bu dönemdeki haberleri incelemek, kamu alanında toplumsal fenomenlere yüklenen anlamları belirlemek açısından önemlidir (Marsh ve Furlong, 2010). Çok yönlü bir nitel analiz aracılığıyla, bu araştırma Türkiye’de Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi etrafında şekillenen teknoloji anlatısına odaklanarak, çağdaş siyasi stratejilerde teknolojinin rolüne ilişkin daha geniş bir söyleme katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Buna ek olarak, kamuoyunun bu popülist stratejiye ilişkin algısını tartışmak amacıyla, belirli uzman ve profesyonellerle derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilecektir. Görüşmeciler, siyasi meselelerin toplumsal etkisini analiz eden mesleki rollerine göre seçilmiştir. Bu grup, araştırma şirketi temsilcileri, gazeteciler, bir teknoloji firmasının yöneticisi ve bir sivil toplum kuruluşunun başkanını içermektedir. Yaklaşık bir saat süren yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerde, teknoloji anlatısının toplumsal etkileri ve kamuoyundaki kabulü değerlendirilmiştir.

Bu çerçeveye dayanarak, tez, AKP’nin teknoloji temelli stratejisinin ulusal ölçekte kalkınma gündemi etrafında yapılandırıldığını, küresel ölçekte uluslararası itibar kazanmayı hedeflediğini ve yerel ölçekte gündelik yaşama yayıldığını, tüm bunların

ise Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın güçlü liderliği doğrultusunda şekillendiğini öne sürmektedir. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi bağlamında, AKP'nin teknoloji temelli stratejisi, rejim tasarımının bir parçası olarak siyasi anlatısını yeniden üretmede kritik bir rol oynamıştır. Bu süreçte, popülist stratejinin çok ölçekli etkileşimi, "lideri", "partiyi" ve "milleti" Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi gündemi etrafında birbirine bağlayarak AKP'nin seçmen tabanı ile olan ilişkisini daha da güçlendirmiştir. Urbinati'nin (2019) vurguladığı gibi, popülizm “serbest ve açık müzakere (ve dolayısıyla muhalefet) yerine, daha çok inanca dayalı bir güven üzerine kurulu bir ideolojidir ve takipçiler ile temsilcileri arasındaki ilişkiyi bu doğrultuda şekillendirir” (s.122). Ayrıca, kilit uzmanlarla yapılan görüşmelerin analizine dayanarak, tez, teknoloji söyleminin AKP'nin seçmen tabanındaki bağlılığı korumak için stratejik bir araç işlevi gördüğünü ve aynı zamanda toplumsal, siyasi ve ekonomik krizin etkilerini hafifleterek seçmen kopuşunu ertelediğini öne sürmektedir. Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi üzerinden Türkiye'nin geleceğini çerçeveleyerek, AKP'nin ülkenin sorunlarını çözme konusunda yetkin olduğu algısını pekiştirmektedir.

Bu çerçevede, AKP'nin teknoloji temelli stratejisi ile kentsel temelli stratejisi arasındaki karşılaştırma, partinin geniş toplumsal kesimlerden rıza üretme sürecinde kentsel temelli stratejisinin nasıl hegemonik hale geldiğini anlamayı sağlamaktadır. İnşaat sektöründeki güçlü ekonomik hâkimiyete dayalı olarak, AKP, konut sektörü, kentsel gelişim, mega projeler ve altyapı yatırımları yoluyla arazi rantı üzerinden yürütülen yeniden dağıtım stratejileriyle geniş toplumsal kesimlerden rıza üretmiş ve böylece partinin hegemonik gücünü inşa etmiştir. Buna karşılık, teknoloji temelli strateji şu ana kadar yalnızca belirli toplumsal kesimlere hitap edebilmiştir. Özellikle AKP seçmenleri ile milliyetçi, muhafazakâr ve muhalif seçmenlere yönelik olarak, Türkiye'nin geleceğini teknolojik ilerlemeler etrafında şekillendiren sembolik bir vizyon sunmaktadır. Ancak, bu stratejinin toplumun geneline ulaşma kapasitesi sınırlı kalmış ve milli teknoloji gündemine bağlı olarak ekonomik faydalar iktidara yakın çevrelerle sınırlı kalmıştır.

Genel olarak, popülist teknoloji stratejisi çerçevesinde şekillenen "millet" ve "halk" etrafındaki bu dinamikler, AKP'nin seçmen tabanını temsil etmeye ve harekete



geçirmeye hizmet etmektedir. Bu kapsayıcı retorik, yalnızca AKP'nin tabanından destek sağlamanın bir aracı olmanın ötesinde, partinin hâkimiyetine meydan okuyan "geri kalan halkın" muhalif seslerini bastırmada da bir mekanizma işlevi görmektedir. Teknoloji stratejisinin söylemi, "millet" ve "halk" kavramlarının sembolik yeniden üretimi yoluyla parti destekçileriyle güçlü bir bağ kuracak şekilde tasarlanmıştır.

Tezin araştırmasının sonuçlarına göre, kalkınmacılığın çıktılarından yola çıkarak, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi (MTH) söyleminin dijital kamu hizmetleri, yapay zeka araştırmaları, uzay çalışmaları, akıllı şehirler ile birlikte yerli otomobil üretimi ve savunma sanayi gibi farklı alanlar için bir vizyon, rehber ve yol haritası olarak ana kalkınma mantığını temsil ettiği sonucuna varılmaktadır. Bu temsilin ideolojik özü, ekonomik büyüme ve müreffeh bir Türkiye etrafında millet ve halkın refahı söylemiyle beslenmektedir. Urbinati'nin (2019) belirttiği üzere, popülizmin temel öncülü 'millet' ve 'halk'tır.

Özellikle teknolojik dönüşüm yoluyla ekonomik büyümeyi teşvik etme bağlamında, AKP iktidarları öncesindeki 'kalkınmamışlık' vurgulanmakta ve bu doğrultuda ülkenin teknolojik temelli bir topluma dönüştürülmesi vizyonu ortaya konulmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan ve AKP yetkilileri, kendi başarılarını önceki dönemlerle karşılaştırarak ifade etmekte; özellikle 'Cumhuriyet tarihinin tamamına' atıfta bulunmaktadır. Siyasal otoritenin bu söylemi, teknolojik ilerlemeleri gerçekleştiren kendi 'ilerlemeci' zihniyetlerini öne çıkarmakta ve kalkınmaya yönelik bütüncül yaklaşımlarını meşrulaştırma işlevi görmektedir.

Ayrıca, kalkınma söylemi, milletin iradesi ve arzularının somutlaştırılmasıyla, bunların Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi (MTH) gündemiyle uyumlu hale getirilmesi yoluyla da beslenmektedir. 2018 yılında MTH etrafında çerçevelenen 'yeni dönem', 2023'te Türkiye Yüzyılı'na yükseltilmiş; milli irade ve arzular ise AKP'nin "Güçlü ve Büyük Türkiye" ile "Tam Bağımsız Türkiye" vizyonunun daha geniş söylemi içinde tanımlanmıştır. Bu vizyon çerçevesinde 'yerli ve milli' üretim temel bir unsur olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Weyland'ın (2017) popülist projelerin arz tarafına dair tespit ettiği gibi, AKP'nin popülizmi halkın hoşnutsuzluklarını yansıtan bir yapıdan ziyade, 'tepeden inme bir strateji' olarak konumlandırılabilir. Popülizm

herhangi bir belirli ideolojiye bağılı olmaktan çok, söylemsel bir çerçeve olarak işlev görmektedir (Laclau, 2005). Bu bağlamda, milletin iradesinin ve arzularının yeniden tahayyül edilmesi/yeni baştan tanımlanması ve “büyük bir medeniyetin mirasçıları” olduğuna dair tarihsel göndermelerin yapılması, teknoloji temelli kalkınma söyleminin kurulmasını ve pekiştirilmesini mümkün kılmaktadır.

Güçlü liderliğin çıktıkları, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi’nin (MTH) uygulanmasında Erdoğan’ın bu vizyonu aktif biçimde sahiplenmesinin, hem seçmen tabanını korumak hem de yeni rejimi meşrulaştırmak amacı taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Erdoğan, bu popülist projeyi ileriye taşıyacak ‘sıra dışı lider’ olarak konumlandırılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, AKP’nin kilit siyasi aktörleri tarafından Erdoğan’ın MTH’nin vizyoner rehberi olarak sunulması, güçlü liderlik imajını pekiştirmekte ve meşrulaştırmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, güçlü liderlik etrafında şekillenen popülist strateji, Erdoğan’ın kişiliğiyle, milletle ve yeni rejimle olduğu kadar, milli teknoloji alanındaki başarılarla da iç içe geçmiştir. Nitekim Weyland’ın (2017) belirttiği gibi, popülizmin özü ve tipik popülist hamlesi, söylemsel olarak güçlendirilen halk ile lideri özdeşleştirmek ve ardından lideri, halktan kaynaklanan güçle donatmaktır (s.54).

Ayrıca, liderin vazgeçilmez rolüne yapılan vurgu, stratejik olarak bir ‘halk-düşman ayrımı’ yaratmanın temeli olarak konumlandırılmakta; aynı zamanda MTH vizyonunun hayata geçirilmesinde milletin düşmanlarını devre dışı bırakma aracına dönüşmektedir. Bu bağlamda, geçmişteki ve mevcut başarıların sabote edilmesine yönelik söylem, tekrar eden bir retorik olarak ‘sözde elit zihniyeti’, belirsiz bir düşman grubu olarak ‘şunlar’ ya da ‘eski Türkiye’nin aktörleri’ gibi ifadelerle çerçevelenmektedir.

Uluslararası itibarla ilgili bulgulara dayanarak, AKP’nin Türkiye’yi ‘bölgesel güç olmanın ötesinde küresel bir oyun kurucu’ olarak konumlandırmayı hedeflediği sonucuna varılabilir. Bu hedef doğrultusunda, yüksek teknoloji endüstrilerine yabancı yatırım çekmek, yatırımcı dostu politikalar geliştirmek ve iş ortamını iyileştirmek ön plandadır. Bu stratejinin merkezinde ise, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi (MTH) kapsamında kritik teknolojilerde atılım yaparak ekonomik bağımsızlık

sağlama amacı yer almaktadır. Siyasi bağımsızlık da vurgulanmakta; yerli teknoloji üretimi yoluyla ulusal çıkarların korunması ve kendi kendine yetebilme kapasitesinin artırılması hedeflenmektedir. Bu çerçevede, savunma sanayii hem ekonomik hem de siyasi bağımsızlığın temel taşı olarak öne çıkarılmakta; yüksek teknoloji liderliği, ulusal güvenlik ve Türkiye'nin uluslararası itibarı açısından itici bir güç olarak sunulmaktadır.

Ayrıca, milli teknolojinin üretilip ihraç edilmesi, yalnızca küresel sahnede ekonomik ve siyasi konumun güçlendirilmesi için değil, aynı zamanda milli gurur ve duyguların harekete geçirilmesi açısından da teşvik edilmektedir. MTH etrafındaki söylem, teknolojik ilerlemeleri doğrudan ulusal güç ve özerklikle ilişkilendirerek yurttaşların güçlenmesini amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, popülist strateji ulusal duyguları yücelterek Türk milletinin teknoloji başarılarıyla gurur duymasını teşvik etmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, “Çılgın Türkler geliyor” ve “Eskiden kapılarında beklerdik” gibi sloganlarla yabancı ülkelere yönelik bir söylem geliştirerek, güç dengelerindeki değişimi ve ulusal özgüveni vurgulamaktadır.

Öte yandan, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi (MTH) ekseninde şekillenen popülist strateji yalnızca ulusal gururu teşvik etmek ve uluslararası itibarı artırmakla sınırlı kalmaz; aynı zamanda geniş bir seçmen desteğini güvence altına almak amacıyla yurttaşların gündelik yaşamına da nüfuz etmeyi hedefler. Bu bağlamda, gündelik yaşama yayılımına ilişkin bulgular, AKP'nin Anadolu şehirlerinin rolünü güçlendirerek bir toplumsal seferberlik yaratma amacıyla olduğunu ve bu çerçevede Teknofest'in MTH'nin bir 'sembol etkinliği' olarak konumlandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Aynı zamanda, bu sembolik eylem yerel siyasi aktörler için şehirlerinin 'marka değerini' artırma aracı olarak da işlev görmektedir. Buna ek olarak, 'yeni dönemin' öznesi olarak 'Teknofest Kuşağı' tanımlanmakta; gençlik, Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi aracılığıyla ulusun geleceğinin taşıyıcısı olarak betimlenmektedir.

MTH'nin gündelik yaşama yayılması, aynı zamanda kamu hizmetlerinin iyileştirilmesi, yerel altyapı ve yeni bir kentleşme vizyonuna odaklanan anlatılar aracılığıyla teşvik edilmektedir. Bu çabanın merkezinde, 'dijital yönetim' ve 'akıllı şehirler' söylemiyle, yerel girişimleri ulusal MTH gündemiyle uyumlu hale getirme

vurgusu yer almaktadır. Bu çerçevede AKP'nin “Kalpten Belediye” ve “Gerçek Belediyecilik” gibi kavramları ön plana çıkmaktadır. Ayrıca, MTH'nin daha geniş hedefleri doğrultusunda, teknolojik olarak gelişmiş şehirler yaratmayı amaçlayan yeni bir kentleşme vizyonu teşvik edilmektedir. Akıllı teknolojilerin devam eden kentsel dönüşüm sürecine entegre edilmesi, AKP'nin yeni kentleşme vizyonuna dair anlatıyı pekiştirmeye devam ederken, bu vizyonu ekonomik büyüme ve ulusal kalkınma hedefleriyle uyumlu hale getirmektedir.

Tez aynı zamanda AKP'nin MTH etrafında şekillenen teknoloji temelli stratejisinin, daha önce kent temelli stratejiyle kurulan hegemonik gücü sürdürmeye yönelik bir araç işlevi görüp görmediğini araştırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çok ölçekli stratejilerin benimsenmesi, siyasi otoritenin popülist teknoloji gündeminin yayılmasına katkı sağlarken, tez aynı zamanda teknoloji anlatısının, AKP'nin destek tabanı içerisinde seçmen sadakatini korumaya yönelik stratejik bir araç olarak işlev gördüğünü savunmaktadır. Devlet öncülüğünde yürütülen teknoloji gündemi, toplumsal, siyasal ve ekonomik krizin etkilerini hafifleterek seçmen kopuşunu ertelemeye yardımcı olmaktadır. Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi çerçevesinde Türkiye'nin geleceğini kurgulayan bu yaklaşım, AKP'nin ülke sorunlarını çözme kapasitesine dair algıyı pekiştirmektedir. Görüşülen uzmanlar, AKP'nin teknoloji temelli stratejisini, ekonomik, toplumsal ve siyasal kriz karşısında geliştirilen temel bir siyasi strateji olarak değerlendirmekte ve bu stratejinin ‘sınırlı’ bir rıza ve seçim başarısı üreterek AKP'nin otoriter yönetimine katkı sunduğunu belirtmektedir. Görüşme analizleri, AKP'nin teknoloji temelli stratejisinin özellikle küresel bağlamla etkileşim kurma noktasında etkili olduğunu; teknolojik gelişmeleri, ulusal gururu artırmak ve prestij hissi yaratmak amacıyla kullandığını, aynı zamanda da birleştirici bir söylem olarak hizmet ettiğini ve esasen parti tabanını güçlendirip desteklerini sürdürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Buna ek olarak, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın güçlü liderlik figürünün tasviri, popülist stratejiyi pekiştiren ve sürdüren temel bir unsur olarak öne çıkmaktadır; Weyland'ın (2017) da vurguladığı gibi, popülizm, ‘halkı tanımlayacak’ bir lidere ihtiyaç duyan yukarıdan aşağıya işleyen bir stratejidir.

Kent ve teknoloji temelli stratejilerin karşılıklı olarak tartışılması, bu stratejilerin farklı ölçeklerde işlediğini öne sürmektedir. Kent temelli strateji, yerel ölçekte, farklı

toplumsal sınıfların çıkarlarını kesiştirerek günlük yaşamda varlık gösterme ve seçim başarısını sağlama konusunda etkili olurken, teknoloji temelli stratejinin günlük yaşama yayılma konusunda sınırlamaları vardır. Ancak, AKP'nin bazı stratejileri devreye soksa da teknoloji temelli strateji, savunma sanayisindeki ilerlemeler, yerli otomobil TOGG üretimi, uzay keşif çabaları gibi ulusal gurur, ihtişam ve prestiji yükseltme amacıyla küresel ölçekte işler, aynı zamanda AKP'nin seçmen tabanını harekete geçirerek destek mobilize eder ve seçim başarısını sürdürür. Ayrıca, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın güçlü liderliğini pekiştirmede kritik bir rol oynar, 'lider' ve 'millet'i popülist projede birbirine bağlar. NTI'yi tanıtarak Erdoğan, sadece yeni rejimi meşrulaştırmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda Türkiye'nin vizyoner lideri olarak imajını güçlendirir ve seçim başarısını ve siyasi egemenliği güvence altına alır. Bu karşılaştırma çerçevesinde tez, teknoloji temelli stratejinin, ağır ekonomik kriz bağlamında AKP'nin 2023 genel seçimlerindeki seçim başarısını sürdürmede etkili bir araç haline geldiği ve özellikle AKP seçmenleri üzerinde etkili olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Ancak, teknoloji temelli strateji henüz yerel düzeyde dengeyi değiştirecek kadar güçlü değildir; özellikle muhalefetin kontrolündeki yerel yönetimlerdeki güç dengesi ve oy dinamiklerini dönüştürmede yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu nedenle, teknoloji gündeminin yerel ölçeğe hitap etme konusundaki sınırlılıkları, 2024 yerel seçimlerinde seçmen kaybını etkilemiştir.

Ayrıca, teknoloji temelli strateji ile kentsel temelli strateji arasındaki bu karşılaştırma, rejimin teknolojik gelişme etrafında şekillenen popülist anlatısının, kentsel mekânın metalaştırılması ve denetimi için yeni stratejilerin genişletilmesini nasıl kolaylaştırdığını tartışma imkânı sunar. Rejimin, Ulusal Teknoloji Girişimi etrafında şekillenen akıllı kentsel dönüşüm vizyonu, Teknofest'in Anadolu şehirlerinin 'marka değerini' artırarak tanıtımında kullanılması ve Teknofest'in AKP açısından sembolik öneme sahip olan millet bahçeleri ve havaalanları gibi kentsel mekânlarda düzenlenmesi, kentsel alanın ekonomik büyüme ve ulusal kalkınma gibi daha geniş hedeflerle uyumlu hale getirilmesine yönelik yeni stratejilerin kurulmasında merkezi bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu mekânsal pratikler, yeni rejimin sembolizmini gündelik kentsel yaşama yerleştirirken, teknolojik olarak dönüştürülmüş bir kentsel modele geçişi de temsil eder. Böylece, teknoloji gündemi

etrafında şekillenen popülist strateji, kentsel alanı hem ekonomik birikim sahası hem de hegemonik iktidarını sürdürmenin yeni bir alanı olarak araçsallaştırır.

Sonuç olarak, AKP'nin popülist stratejisiyle 'millet'in ve 'halk'ın yeniden üretilmesine yönelik dinamikler; ulusal ölçekte kalkınma gündemi etrafında yapılandırılan, küresel ölçekte uluslararası itibar kazanmayı hedefleyen ve yerel ölçekte gündelik yaşama nüfuz eden bir biçimde, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın güçlü liderliği altında yönlendirilerek, AKP'nin seçmen tabanını harekete geçirmeye ve ekonomik, sosyal ve siyasal kriz bağlamında yeni rejimin otoriter yönetimini meşrulaştırmaya hizmet etmektedir. Popülist stratejinin çok ölçekli etkileşimi, 'lideri', 'partiyi' ve 'milleti' Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi gündemi etrafında birbirine kenetleyerek, AKP'nin seçmen tabanıyla olan ilişkisini daha da pekiştirmektedir. Bu ilişki, "temsilciyle ve takipçiler arasında serbest ve açık müzakere yoluyla değil, inanç yoluyla güven"e dayanmaktadır (Urbinati, 2011, s.122). Öte yandan, AKP'nin popülist anlatısı, teknoloji temelli stratejisi aracılığıyla, AKP ile özdeşleşen 'halk' ile geri kalan 'halk' arasında bir ayırım yaratarak (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019; Özen, 2020), kentsel stratejiye dayalı kapsayıcı söyleminin aksine, daha otoriter bir karakter kazanmaktadır. Bu süreçte, 'millet'in ve 'halk'ın simgesel temsillerinin yeniden üretimi de, mega projeler, altyapı ve kentsel dönüşümle özdeşleşen temsilden, teknolojiyle güçlendirilmiş bir temsile evrilmektedir: Ulusal otomobil TOGG yollarda Avrupa'yı fethetmeye hazır, ilk Türk astronot ve ulusal uydular uzayı fethetmekte, milli gemiler, tanklar ve İHA'lar iç ve dış güvenliği sağlamakta, şehirler ileri teknolojiyle dönüşmekte, bilim ve teknoloji ise kapsamlı Ar-Ge destekleriyle teşvik edilmekte, teknolojik girişimcilik desteklenmektedir; genel olarak Türkiye, dijital ve teknolojik olarak güçlendirilmiş bir millete dönüşmektedir. Ancak lider, parti ve 'millet' ile iç içe geçen Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi'nin kamuoyu desteğini uzun vadede sürdürülebilir kılma kapasitesi, demokratik normlara dayanan müzakereci karşı stratejilerle sınanmasına bağlıdır.

Gelecek araştırmalar, başka ulusal bağlamlarda teknoloji üzerine kurulu popülist stratejilerin çok ölçekli dinamiklerini keşfetmek için bu araştırmayı kullanabilir. Ayrıca, farklı ülkeler arasındaki karşılaştırmalı çalışmalar, teknoloji söyleminin farklı bağlamlara nasıl uyum sağladığını aydınlayabilir. Öte yandan, bu tez otoriter bir

bağlamda devletin yönlendirdiği stratejilere odaklanırken, teknolojik gelişimle etkileşimde çok ölçekli stratejiler, yerel, ulusal ve küresel aktörlerin otoriter bağlamlarda teknoloji odaklı anlatıları şekillendirirken ve buna karşı gelirken nasıl etkileşimde bulunduklarına ilişkin analiz edilebilir. Örneğin, belediye yönetimlerinin, özel sektör aktörlerinin ve uluslararası organizasyonların merkezi hükümetin teknoloji milliyetçisi gündemine nasıl katkıda bulunduğu veya buna karşı nasıl direndiği incelenerek, bu söylemlerde gömülü karmaşık güç ilişkileri ortaya çıkarılabilir. Araştırma esas olarak siyasi anlatılar ve politika belgelerinin söylem analizine dayanırken, gelecekteki araştırmalar maddi etkiler ve somut politikalar üzerine çalışmalarla tartışmanın perspektifini genişletebilir. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin bir vaka çalışması olarak analizi, otoriterliğe giden yolu ve söylemin otoriter dinamikleri pekiştirmedeki rolünü incelemeye yardımcı olur. Böylece tez, ülkedeki otoriter siyasi manzarayı anlamaya katkıda bulunur.

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