

AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism

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Abstract The aim of this study is to draw a conceptual framework for populism and then analyze AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism in terms of examples of political discourse. Three main conceptualization lines are used to open populism to discussion: Anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, anti-elite and charismatic leader, and anti-pluralist emphasis on homogeneous people. AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism has a content in line with these core features. While linking AKP populism to the general framework of populism, the themes such as New Turkey and New Osmanism have helped us to deepen the discussion within a holistic framework.

Keywords AKP · Populism · Democracy · New Turkey · Neo-Ottomanism

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Der Autoritäre Rechtspopulismus der AKP

Zusammenfassung Ziel dieser Studie ist es, einen konzeptionellen Rahmen für Populismus zu entwerfen und dann den rechtsautoritären Populismus der AKP anhand von Beispielen aus dem politischen Diskurs zu analysieren. Drei wesentliche Konzeptualisierungslinien werden verwendet, um den Populismus zur Diskussion zu stellen: Anti-Rationalismus, Anti-Elitismus, Anti-Elite und charismatischer Führer, und anti-pluralistische Betonung von homogenen Menschen. Der rechtsautoritäre Populismus der AKP entspricht inhaltlich diesen Kernmerkmalen. Während wir den AKP-Populismus zum einen mit den generellen Populismus-Konzepten verknüpft haben, konnten wir zum anderen mittels der Themen „Neue Türkei“ und des Neo-Osmanismus die Diskussion in einem ganzheitlichen Rahmen zu vertiefen.

Schlüsselwörter AKP · Populismus · Demokratie · Neue Türkei · Neo-Osmanismus

1 Introduction

Populism is the most appropriate conceptualization ground for the politics of the AKP government, which has left its mark on Turkey's recent history. This study will first construct a theoretical framework for populism and then narrow the discussion to right-wing populism and right-wing populist politics, focusing on the AKP. The factual details explaining AKP right-wing authoritarian populism are systematized under the headings of New Turkey and Neo-Ottomanism. As we will discuss in the final section of the text, one of the article's central claims is that AKP populism can only be interpreted reasonably in the context of the dynamics of transformation and conflict in the dominant ideological codes in Turkey, particularly Islamism and Kemalism.

2 Populism: disease of the age

It is appropriate to consider populism as a sparse ideology because this ideological form has left and right versions. In other words, it is possible to call Erdoğan, Syriza and PODEMOS populist. Moreover, populism can take diametrically opposed forms in different political cultures, regimes and even in power and opposition. Populism is a universal phenomenon. But it is also diffuse and amorphous. Therefore, when talking about populism, the fundamental question of a hidden subject accompanies it. The question of which populism determines the ideological boundary of populism debates (Kaltwasser 2012, pp. 195–6).

We can begin our discussion by touching upon a number of elements that further complicate the multi-layered world of meaning of populism. First, the concept of the people, which is at the core of this ideological orientation, has a historically ambiguous content. The contradictory relationship between the people, the nation and the community of citizens deeply affects modern populism. As we will elab-

orate in detail in this text, most populists tend to distinguish between the people and the real people. Moreover, populism is often a pejorative label. When we call a movement or party populist, we consider it superficial or inadequate (Fassin 2018, pp. 17–8; Müller 2019, p. 14; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 12–3, 20; Öztürk 2020, p. 200). Especially in the liberal approach that sees populism as a threat to democracy, this condescending language is quite advanced. The reading of populism by radical democracy supporters and the left is more positive. On the other hand, empirical research looks at the situation or context when determining the value of populism. According to this line, populism can sometimes be a threat to democracy, while sometimes it can correct its flaws (Kaltwasser 2012, pp. 185–196). To summarize, then, the ambiguity in the concept of the people and ideological differences regarding the relationship between democracy and populism render the concept vague. This state of ambiguity also brings with it dysfunctionality. The widespread use of the concept has turned it into a political garbage dump. As Ranciere puts it, all disagreements with the dominant consensus are put in the same basket and referred to as populism (Ranciere 2006).

Despite all these methodological difficulties, it is still possible to draw up a list of basic characteristics for populism. Referring to the problematic of this article, each feature of this list also characterizes the main political instruments of AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism. First, anti-rationalism can be mentioned (1): Populists appeal to emotions as well as reason. While the emotional aspect is advantageous in terms of concretizing politics, this orientation inevitably leads to a superficial and distorted discourse. The populist style of politics has a superficial language that simplifies the most complex problems. When you listen to a populist, you feel like you are listening to a dishonest salesman trying to sell his wares with exaggerated statements, a distorted chain of cause and effect, and a demagogic and exaggerated discourse that replaces seriousness. Distorting the truth, appealing to emotions by disabling reason, confining reasoning to the self-proving pseudoscience of conspiracy theories, even if reason is to be used, are among the hallmarks of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 12–4; Müller 2019, pp. 16–7; Moffitt 2016, p. 146; Pauwels 2014, pp. 1–2; Streeck 2017, pp. 188–190; Öztürk 2020, p. 201). It is important to keep in mind that this link between populism and anti-rationalism can also be interpreted as evidence of the ideological genealogy linking populist politics to its distant ancestor fascism. Moreover, anti-rationalism is important not only in terms of the habit of giving simplistic answers, but also in terms of a way of thinking that is confined to the local and cultural context as opposed to universal solutions (Arter 2010, p. 490). In terms of this last characteristic, a populist has nothing to say to humanity. He only cares about his own society and enters into a dialog with it.

But to which difficult problems does populism provide easy answers? Which areas can be considered as examples of its anti-rationalism? In answering these questions, it may be appropriate to open a bet on the economy and xenophobia and to theorize the movements in populism's world of action. The rise of populism in the last quarter century also corresponds to the deepening of the long-term crisis of capitalism. The economic crisis has affected the whole world, from the core capitalist societies to the periphery, and unemployment, cost of living and indebtedness have

become the norms of everyday life. In the face of the economic crisis, right-wing populist demagogues have resorted to two discourses: First, institutions are blamed. This pseudo anti-capitalist discourse, which has also received considerable support from left-wing populists, targets economic policies disconnected from the people and institutions run by professional politicians and bureaucrats. This targeting translates into political projects that can be summarized as a low-intensity anti-imperialist stance, nostalgia for a return to the national welfare state against globalization, and the destruction of autonomous domestic institutional structures in favor of the charismatic leader's superior decision-making power. Trump's political discourse promising a return to a strong America, the opposition to EU institutions by populist parties large and small in Europe, and the Brexit vote, which ultimately went down in history as the victory of populism, are among the most well-known developments of the populist ground against globalization in general and economic and political rationality in particular (Zabcı 2017, pp. 11–3; Yıldırım 2017, pp. 62–4; Fassin 2018, p. 16; Mudde 2013, pp. 9–10; Öztürk 2020, p. 203, 2022, p. 659).

At this point, two more details should be mentioned: Right-wing populism's discourse against global capitalism creates a suitable intellectual ground for one of the triangulation points of this ideological form, the anti-elite, which we will examine in detail in terms of the AKP example in this article. In the populist moment, while global capitalism is challenged, elites are also challenged. Another issue is mismanagement. Anti-rationalism, the most fundamental characteristic of populism, inevitably makes arbitrariness the normal mode of politics. Populists oppose institutions and rules. Instead of these two sources of norms, the temporary and unpredictable will of leaders sets the course of governance. Once on this path, however, the bankruptcy of the state through high and inefficient public spending becomes inevitable. Where populism comes to power, it creates a structure suitable for producing economic crises (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 12–4; Müller 2019, pp. 16–7; Öztürk 2020, p. 201). In the face of the danger of the absolute collapse of the economy and the bankruptcy of the state, the anti-globalization discourse is functional. Because in this way, the blame is placed on the other or the external enemy. Right-wing populist propaganda does not take the blame for the economic and political disasters that befall the country. It is said that things are going badly not because those running the state are unsuccessful and incompetent, but because the outside world has created a crisis. In this last context, anti-globalization serves as an ideological cover for populism in the true sense of the word. The right-wing populist leader who challenges the outside world, or at least tries to create such an image, hides the negative consequences of anti-rationalist functioning in this way.

We have already said that one of the easy response areas of anti-rationalist populist thought is the economy, and to a certain extent economic simplicity also includes anti-capitalist discourse. However, the examples of Latin America and Italy clearly show (Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, Forza Italy, Brazil, Fernando Collor de Mello, Peru, Alberto Fujimori, Argentina, Carlos Menem) that it is not so easy to distinguish populism from neo-liberalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, p. 497). Many well-known populist leaders, movements and movements do not refrain from using the

instruments of the neo-liberal world of thought.¹ Of course, this result should not be surprising. Right-wing populism does not promote a radical objection to the capitalist system, and in certain cases, might take the form of an anti-welfare populism to “redirect blame for middle-class ontological and material insecurities on to unemployed welfare recipients”.²

The second important policy area of the anti-rationalist reading of populism that provides easy answers to difficult problems is foreigners. While it is true that in isolated cases such as Bolivia, Venezuela and Thailand, populist leaders have brought marginalized segments of society into the system, leading to political sociological relief, the general trend is in the opposite direction. Populism is exclusionary. Anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment is one of the most well-known arguments of right-wing populist politics. This practice of exclusion, which sometimes shows racist symptoms, also reproduces a status quoist mentality towards the classical nation-state form in the context of the issue of protecting the sovereign rights of the nation-state (Moffitt 2016, pp. 146–7; Galston 2018, pp. 14–5; Weyland 2001, p. 15; Öztürk 2020, p. 203).

The second important feature of populism is anti-elite and charismatic leader advocacy. Populism's view of governance is monist. Bureaucratic elites, the institutions they head, and all kinds of rules that link the normal to the norm are subject to populist opposition. The political equation in populism's imagination is that a single people delegate sovereignty to a single ruler and that this superior leader governs the country in direct contact with the people until the elections. In this leader-people identity, all intermediate cadres, institutions and boards become redundant. This perspective, which combines democracy and dictatorship, is a continuation of Rousseau's theory of the general will, Schmitt's criticism of parliamentary democracy and fascist realpolitik (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 18–25, 59–60; Rousseau 1987; Schmitt 2006; Müller 2019, pp. 46–54; Crick 2005, p. 626; Öztürk 2020, p. 201, 2022, pp. 680–1; Weyland 2001, p. 14; Levitsky and Roberts 2011, pp. 6–7; Leaman 2004, p. 324). This personal anti-institutionalist political orientation presents the struggle between the elites and the leader not as a struggle for the sharing of authority, but as a deep opposition of the governed to the governors in the context of the fight against corruption and mismanagement. In other words, the populist leader is the one who reveals the real agenda, needs and voice of the people (Taggart 2004, p. 139; Hayward 1996, pp. 10–23).

The image of a strong leader is reminiscent of authoritarianism in an optimistic interpretation and fascism in a more historical perspective. Moreover, this strong authoritarian leader is common in both right and left versions of populism. A strong leader leads to a weak ideology and party. As we have already emphasized, one of the reasons why populism is rarely considered as an ideology lies in the fact that charismatic leaders supersede ideology and instrumentalize all political ideas and currents for their own survival in power. The party-leader relationship is also asymmetrical.

¹ For a case study of Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu and Argentina's Carlos Menem as populist leaders who integrate neo-liberal policies into their agenda while enjoying support from lower classes which are most damaged by such policies, see File (2011, pp. 221–238).

² The concept of neo-liberal populism, see Meade and Kiely (2020, pp. 29–49).

The populist party is usually the party of the leader (Öztürk 2022, pp. 661–2; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 59–61, 72–4). However, the phenomenon to which this reminder refers is not widespread. It is true that in the Latin American experience the party is the shadow of the leader. But in the European political geography, populist parties are more permanent than leaders. In most cases the party is not an extension of the leader.

The last feature of populism takes on a concrete content in the emphasis on homogenous people against pluralism. The triangulation point of populism is the concept of the people. In this ideological form, the public refers to the fundamental reality that is both manipulated and politicized. The people are considered as a homogeneous whole. This assumption is based on a moral inference rather than a political sociological assumption. In almost all cases, right-wing populism refers to the real people. Opponents, others, external extensions from within are excluded from this real people. The quasi-mystical, quasi-political connection between the leader and the people comes into question at the point of representation of the real people. Those segments of the people who are not considered part of the people are suppressed, excluded, and even criminalized by enemy criminal law. There is not yet a populist politics that has returned to the conditions of fascism of the 30s and has completely abolished democracy. However, it is clear that right-wing populism has adopted an anti-pluralist and pro-majoritarian style of politics. This is what makes right-wing populism so dangerous for liberal democracy. Right-wing populism tends towards a dictatorship of the majority that ignores differences. Once in power, the right-wing populist party uses state resources to oppress the opposition in order to create the homogeneous society of its dreams. Systematic discrimination and exclusion are essential features of populism. Therefore, where populists come to power, the social risk to those who are different or other increases. As a result, it can be easily said that anti-liberal populist democracy narrows the space for democratic practices and confines the system to a competitive authoritarian environment (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 28–30, 102–7, 117; Müller 2019, pp. 15–6, 36–9, 42–6, 63, 69–70, 101–2; Öztürk 2020, p. 202, 2022, pp. 660–1).

3 AKP's populism

At the point of clarifying the basic characteristics of AKP populism, we can first mention the Neo-Ottomanist imagination. Neo-Ottomanism has a functional content at many points such as anti-elite, charismatic leader construction, anti-rationalist political culture construction and homogenous nation perception. The neo-Ottomanist mentality can be read as an attempt to establish an alternative national memory by recalling the glorious Ottoman past. This attempt is also closely related to the aim of praising the Ottoman identity against the Republican elites and thus building a new political hegemony. This language that emotionally invests in the Ottoman Empire both legitimizes the imperialist appetite through the glorious past and designs a homogeneous society that excludes the other by allowing the fermentation of

a new nationalism with an Islamic bias. Erdoğan and Bahçeli's³ political language emphasizing "local and national" points to this real nation. In the context of this last reminder, it can easily be said that Islamic sensitivity or outright Islamism is at the top of the list of ingredients that constitute the ideological core of AKP's populist spirit (Tokdoğan 2018, pp. 16–7, 21, 57, 67, 73, 79; Vardar 2010, p. 180).

While the Neo-Ottomanist perspective recalls history, it also appeals to the need for a strong subject in the country-state-leader identity. The strong subject is a populist design that has emotional resonance with the public. The conceptual jargon of this design is constructed with concepts such as ancestors, civilization, conquest, resurrection and ascension. The great subject is undoubtedly the Turkish-Islamic society. The real nation, traumatized and victimized by the modernizing onslaught of the Republic, turns into a political body in the person of Erdoğan that simultaneously embodies both the victim and the powerful (Tokdoğan 2018, pp. 81–3, 103–4). Erdoğan is both Menderes⁴ and Abdülhamid II.⁵ Certain historical details identified with the life stories of these two leaders—execution, dethronement, economic development, electoral success against elites, Islamic unity and independence against the West—serve as an emotional ground of credibility for Erdoğan's political moves. These two spirits invoked by Erdoğan, on the one hand, constantly remind the audience of how cruel the enemies within are, and on the other hand, transform the strength, dignity and resistance of the one of us against the cruelty of the other into a functional material that can be used in today's contemporary political struggle (Tokdoğan 2018, pp. 70, 116–121, 127, 145–9; Koyuncu 2014, pp. 147–151).

In conclusion, the following claim can easily be made: Neo-Ottomanism is, on the one hand, a summary of the political cultural conditions that make AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism possible and, on the other hand, a structural result of the right-wing authoritarian government's efforts to shape society, politics, culture and society.

In the debate on AKP's authoritarian populism, the label of New Turkey is as important as Neo-Ottomanism. The contribution of the New Turkey process to authoritarian populism can be concretized in two points: The politics of social welfare, which has led to the gratitude of the masses to the AKP and its leader Erdoğan, and the majoritarian understanding of democracy, which has antagonized the opposition. The AKP opinion industry tends to present the history of Turkey as a history of victims and oppressors. This distorted perspective puts the religious-conservative social sector on one side and the enemies of the political power on the other. The religious-Muslim social sector is the oppressed and victimized in every situation—even when in power. The social base of the New Turkey, which makes atrocities invisible by sanctifying its own subjectivity, identifies its existence with the existence of the nation. This politics of marginalization, in which those who vote for the AKP are the real nation, condemns the opposition to an illegitimate and immoral position.

³ Devlet Bahçeli is a Turkish academic, economist and politician. Since July 6, 1997, he has been the Chairperson of the MHP.

⁴ Adnan Menderes served as the President of the Democratic Party and Prime Minister between 1950 and 1960. After the May 27, 1960 coup, he was executed by hanging.

⁵ Abdülhamid II, 34th Ottoman sultan. He was on the throne between 1876–1908.

The opposition is not only immoral but also dangerous. Any political opening and (or) rights struggle of the opposition for the democratization of Turkey is seen as dangerous for the survival of the state. Once this path is taken, it becomes inevitable that the opposition is criminalized and treated like a terrorist organization (Yılmaz 2018, pp. 13, 16, 28–29, 33–8, 43; Türk 2014, p. 19; Öztan 2014, p. 99).

This anti-opposition right-wing authoritarian antagonizing line, which reduces the nation to its own electorate, imposes a populist and conservative understanding of national will on the political institution. As populism's view of sovereignty became the norm in the political sphere, the level of Turkish democracy regressed towards a plesibitary democracy. In this new order, all obstacles limiting the regime have been removed and merit, pluralism and freedom of expression have been almost completely eliminated. At this point, it would not be wrong to make the following judgment. AKP populism has had a constricting effect on democracy, and in parallel with the aforementioned negative agenda, the political norm has moved away from civility, the public sphere and human rights demands (Yılmaz 2018, pp. 162–3, 166, 169, 189, 202; Türk 2014, p. 211).

In terms of the structural conditions that brought AKP democracy into existence, two points can be highlighted: The Turkish bourgeoisie significantly supported the anti-democratic state, namely the increasingly authoritarian AKP populism. Moreover, there is a close and intense relationship between the AKP's populist politics of more than 20 years and the weak counter-strategy of the opposition. When we unpack these two propositions, we see the following picture:

Turkey's modernization experience is close to what Moore calls fascist and Tilly calls coercive. Very roughly, there is a form of social organization that is capitalist but not democratic. In fact, antidemocratic politics is one of the basic elements of capitalist accumulation. The relative weakness of the bourgeois class throughout the last two centuries condemned Turkish modernization to a bureaucratic content for a very long time and the flourishing of a Turkish bourgeoisie became one of the goals of this modernization project. As such, the bourgeois class is highly dependent on the state, regardless of its secular or Islamic character. This statist aspect has led to a lack of the democratic pluralism expected from the bourgeois class, which has both condemned the political climate in Turkey to an overly cultural content in the center-periphery debates and kept the patronage logic that prevents civil society from achieving an autonomous structure alive (Öztürk 2018, pp. 89–103; Moore 2003; Tilly 2001; Keyder 2014, pp. 10–1, 63–4; Mardin 2000, pp. 87–90; İnel 2014, pp. 24–5; Çaylak 2016, pp. 85–6).

As a final result of this structural condition, the bourgeoisie is highly dependent on the state apparatus. The absence of any serious objection from the bourgeois class to the AKP's authoritarian political construction is largely related to this relationship of continuity. Moreover, the level of close cooperation of the Islamic bourgeoisie with the AKP state apparatus and the party's political economy, which reproduces the neo-liberal order while preserving patronage reserves, has turned the bourgeoisie into a structural pillar of AKP populism (Özsel et al. 2013, pp. 551–570).

Without completely disregarding this general framework, it is necessary to voice a justifiable objection to the bourgeoisie-AKP relations. Namely, the Turkish bourgeoisie supported the AKP government's anti-labor policies. However, it is clear that

the big business and financial circles represented by TÜSİAD criticize the instability in the economic policies of the party-state apparatus. It can also be pointed out that there is a tension with a political dimension between the secular bourgeoisie gathered around TÜSİAD and the Islamic bourgeoisie led by MUSİAD (Erden 2022, pp. 1101–1139).

Another supporting factor for the long-term success of AKP populism is the ineffective opposition. Although the Millet Alliance, whose foundations were laid in 2018, and the success achieved in the 2019 local elections reversed the situation to some extent, it is seen that for a very long time the anti-AKP opposition could not come together in terms of building an alternative historical bloc. While Turkish politics, society and the state have become more conservative, the opposition, especially the main opposition, has failed to mobilize the people and has bowed to the AKP hegemony.

It is true that the Millet alliance has given momentum to the opposition. However, both the fact that 5 out of the 6 parties that make up the alliance are political parties on the right, and the CHP's attitude, which has turned into a pale copy of the AKP on the right in a sense, away from universal left values and the party's social democratic background in order not to disturb these right-wing parties, strengthens the perception that the Millet Alliance is an alternative within the right-wing hegemony rather than an alternative to the right-wing hegemony.

Another important pillar of AKP's right-wing populism is the politics of social assistance. AKP implements a social assistance program that will provide it with political capital. The basis of the aid policy is citizens' gratitude to the party (Yılmaz 2018, pp. 64–8). As a party-state apparatus, AKP has pursued a strategy of mixed philanthropy. One pillar of this philanthropy is Islamic foundations and associations, while the other pillar is the neo-liberal economy. Philanthropy, which has strong roots in Islam, has been reorganized by the AKP in order to win elections, and has been elaborated in such a way as to make citizens grateful to the AKP regime in general and its embodiment, Erdoğan, in particular. Although the party does not emphasize social justice as much as it did in its early years, it still enjoys considerable support from the poor. Social aid plays a critical role in mobilizing this poor and religious mass towards power. In this context, there is a deep and strong link between AKP's political hegemony and the politics of Islamic social aid (Yılmaz 2018, pp. 71–3, 82, 91, 94, 113–5, 123).

This social assistance mechanism, which encourages a sense of gratitude to the party and the leader, may need to be interpreted in terms of neo-liberalism. On the one hand, the AKP regime has pursued neo-liberal economic policies; on the other hand, it has softened the harsh side of neo-liberalism to some extent through conservative social policy. As emphasized in this text, there is a high level of articulation between neo-liberalism and populism. Conservative social policy is significantly related to the paternalistic side of Turkish capitalism.

Another point concerns the changing balance after the 2019 local elections. With these elections, big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Mersin and Adana came under the control of the opposition. The AKP's loss of its former power in local governments has dealt a blow to the party's social aid policy, which was carried out through communities and municipalities. In conclusion, we can say that conservative

social policy, which is one of the founding instruments of AKP populism, still retains its effectiveness, provided that the links between social policy and locality weaken. However, the performance of opposition municipalities, especially during the covid process, which turned into an alternative social aid focus to the government, has limited the political power of AKP populism.

The New Turkey and the Neo-Ottoman policies contain clues to the jargon that makes the AKP both powerful and oppositional at the same time. AKP populism, built on these two pillars, can also be read as a process of liquidating Kemalism. On behalf of the non-elite religious social sector, that is, the real nation and its national will, the AKP clashed with the Kemalist structure, which was heavily represented in the state apparatus, particularly in the army, universities and the judiciary. The conflict was realized at the level of action, from the April 27th Memorandum to the Ergenekon-Balyoz trials, and in terms of discourse, as a revolt of the national will against the tutelage of the deep state. This process, which resulted in the liquidation of the secular center, resulted in the victory of AKP populism (Özşeker 2017, pp. 137–149). In terms of anti-Kemalism, it can be said that the AKP party-state apparatus acted in tandem with the Kurdish movement, the liberal social sector and elements of the community that would later be known as FETÖ.⁶ These groups associated the lack of democracy in the country entirely with Kemalism, exaggerated the impact of bureaucratic modernization on political authoritarianism, and white-washed non-Kemalist authoritarian understandings or forms of tutelage with this one-sided reading (Aytürk 2015, pp. 36–7, 41–4; Öztürk 2017, pp. 93–4).

It should not be forgotten that the support of the Kurdish movement, liberal intellectuals and the Gülen community in opposition to Kemalism has resulted in a limited historical and political level. For example, the Kurdish movement has developed a strong relationship with the AKP government throughout the resolution process. However, it is clear that the roles have completely reversed in terms of the post-2015 process. The relationship between the AKP government and the Kurdish movement deteriorated rapidly after 2015. A similar situation is also valid for liberals and FETÖ supporters. With the Gezi protests, liberals' support for the AKP decreased dramatically. Since 2013, a political struggle has started between the Gülen Community and the AKP, and this group has been declared a terrorist organization due to the role played by Gülen supporters in the 2016 coup attempt.

In the context of the ideological transformation of anti-Kemalist AKP populism, three points should be emphasized: First of all, the Kemalists' distant attitude towards human rights, liberal democracy and globalization made the Islamist-liberal alliance's job much easier. The second issue concerns the critical position of liberals. The attitude of the liberals, including the liberalized Turkish left,⁷ vouching for the Islamist social sector and the intensive promotion of the thesis that an Islamic restoration with the AKP as the main actor corresponds to the ideal solution for

⁶ Fethullahists: An Islamic sect referred to by the word FETÖ. The Fethullahists or FETÖ played an active role in the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

⁷ The liberal left, which supports the anti-Kemalist alliance along with Islamists and conservatives, represents an ideological cluster that mostly refers to the writers of Birikim Magazine and the Taraf newspaper. For Birikim Magazine, see Öztürk (2011); for Taraf newspaper, see Aladağ (2013).

Turkish capitalism and democracy accelerated the process of Kemalism's liquidation. However, in the post-liquidation conjuncture, there have been serious ruptures in the positions of the actors. For example, in the face of increasing AKP repression, Kemalism became a focus of civil resistance. This popularity of the Kemalist line softened to some extent the criticism of Kemalism by those who had criticized conservatism at the hands of the state. In addition, the AKP has also changed, and the Islamists' traditional anti-Atatürk and anti-Atatürkist rhetoric has been largely pushed to the background. In the post-July 15 period, AKP's approach to the nationalist segment through the MHP⁸ led to a thawing of the ice with Atatürk and the nationalist team (Şahin 2008, pp. 60, 75–82, 139–143, 151, 164–5, 179, 184–5; Aktoprak 2017, pp. 47–8, 50–1; Öztürk 2011, pp. 177–204, 2017, p. 97).

4 Conclusion

We have attempted to analyze AKP right-wing authoritarian populism through the conceptualizations of Neo-Ottomanism and New Turkey. The general framework is that AKP politics carries and reproduces the universal characteristics of populism to a significant extent. Perhaps the biggest exception to this generalization is xenophobia. Right-wing populist movements use xenophobic language. The demonization of immigrants and refugees in particular, and of segments of society other than the dominant ethnic group in general, is common within populism. However, when we look at AKP politics, we see that the political power uses a language that is not antagonizing but rather encouraging integration, especially when it comes to Syrians, the main subject of xenophobia in the country. Of course, the Syrians in Turkey correspond to the masses who came to Turkey due to the AKP government's wrong Syria policy. For this reason, anti-Syrian sentiment is more intense among the anti-AKP secular nationalist segment, and in general, these masses continue to criticize the Syrians and the AKP in parallel.

Another important issue is the ideological content of populism. AKP's right-wing authoritarian populism has at times been influenced by Islamism, nationalism, conservatism and even liberalism. In more than 20 years, the general trend has been from liberalism to nationalism, with the Islamist-conservative weight remaining constant. In other words, the AKP abandoned the liberal language it used in the first years of its rule and adopted a more nationalist and monist jargon. Of course, there is a parallelism between this change in the AKP and the decline in its populist character. As the AKP has become more state-oriented and less reliant on the apparatus of persuasion, it has also become less popular.

Conflict of interest A. Öztürk declares that he has no competing interests.

⁸ MHP: A political party founded on February 9, 1969, under the leadership of Alpaslan Türkeş, whose main political direction is Turkish nationalism.

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