

# **Synopsis of PhD Dissertation**

## **Political Psychology of International Relations in the Frame of Populism Cases of Hungary and Türkiye**

Büşra Özyüksel

Supervisors: Dr. Norbert Merkovity and Dr. Béla Révész

**Szeged, 2025**

## Background of the Dissertation

Populism, by its very nature, operates primarily at the point of intersection of domestic and international politics and often obscures the boundaries between the two. At the domestic level, populism is characterized by its appeal to the “people” instead of perceived “elites”.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, at the international level, it often displays itself as resistance to global norms and institutions.<sup>2</sup> Because of its dual focus, populism requires an analytical approach that combines micro-level interactions, such as the role of leaders, with macro-level dynamics, such as systemic pressures and societal responses. In this context, this dissertation takes a stance that the political psychology of populist international relations provides fertile ground for examining how populist leaders navigate and reshape the global order through their domestic and international strategies.

This dissertation begins by outlining the theoretical framework, which provides a solid foundation to build this work. Here the political psychology of populist international relations, specifically taking Türkiye<sup>3</sup> and Hungary as case studies, is examined. To settle populism within the wider field of international relations, this study primarily utilizes a poststructuralist theoretical perspective as a foundation for situating populism within the field of international relations. Constructivism and neoclassical realism serve as supporting, secondary frameworks for contextualizing the discourses, offering corresponding insights into structural constraints (neoclassical realism) and identity formation (constructivism) as they relate to poststructuralism’s focus on discourse and power dynamics. These theories offer corresponding insights into how populism operates as both a political and psychological phenomenon in the international arena. poststructuralism highlights the role of discourse in challenging established narratives and power structures and in constructing alternative views of international politics.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Majia Nadesan and Amit Ron, “Between ‘the People’ and Elites: Introduction,” in *Mapping Populism: Approaches and Methods*, ed. Majia Nadesan and Amit Ron (New York: Routledge, 2020): 123–145. ; Matthijs Rooduijn, “The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 573–599.

<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Metawe, “Populism and Domestic/International Politics: Theory and Practice,” *Review of Economics and Political Science* 9, no. 3 (2024): 194–211, at 205.

<sup>3</sup> The country name “Turkey” has been changed to “Türkiye” at the UN (United Nations, “Turkey’s Name Changed to Türkiye,” *UN News*, 2022, <https://turkiye.un.org/en/184798-turkeys-name-changed-t%C3%BCrkiye>). Therefore, in this dissertation the name is going to be used as Türkiye.

<sup>4</sup> Frank A. Stengel and Dirk Nabers, “Symposium: The Contribution of Laclau’s Discourse Theory to International Relations and International Political Economy Introduction,” *New Political Science* 41 (2019): 248–262; Mario Baumann, “Poststructuralism in International Relations: Discourse and the Military,” in *Handbook of Military Sciences*, ed. Anders McD. Sørensen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 1–18.

Neoclassical realism offers a structural lens that focuses on how systemic constraints and domestic political factors interact to shape state behavior.<sup>5</sup> Constructivism emphasizes the significance of socially constructed identities, beliefs, and norms<sup>6</sup> in understanding the motivations and strategies of populist leaders. These theories provide a potent framework for analyzing the complicatedness of populist international relations.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the political psychology of populist international relations. As both a domestic and international phenomenon, populism draws on elements of each theory to construct its narratives, strategies and policies. Poststructuralism reveals the discursive methods through which populist leaders challenge global order, constructionism illuminates the importance of identity and collective memory, and neoclassical realism explains the structural and systemic factors that generate populist behavior. Taken as a whole, these strategies emphasize the complexity of populism and its impact on modern world affairs.

The rest of the dissertation will base on this theoretical framework to analyze the discourses and policies of Erdoğan and Orbán in the cases of Türkiye and Hungary through using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method. By comprehensively examining the foreign policy tactics and domestic political discourses of populist leaders, this research aims to shed light on how the populist leaders negotiate the intricacies of the global system while changing the intellectual and psychological foundations of their countries. In this way, it is hoped to gain further insights into the relationship among international relations, political psychology, and populism.

While the 2018 and 2022-2023 election periods in Hungary and Türkiye are the focal points of this dissertation, the chronological order is not only descriptive but also methodologically intentional. It allows for the examination of how populist discourse has shifted with changing national and global circumstances and demonstrates how populism has shifted its vocabulary, emotional tone, and psychological strategies in response to changing political environments. This thesis's period-focused design elucidates the performative and processual aspects of populist communication, as well as the complex relationship between discourse, emotion, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Brian C. Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17 (2008): 294–321.; Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey T. Checkel, "The Constructive Turn in International Relations Theory," *World Politics* 50, no. 3 (1998): 324–348.; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 391–416.

global positioning. While a thematic comparison between themes such as anti-Westernism, Soros/Gülen narratives, jihadist terrorism, or pan-Turkish discourse would also be useful, the chronological method employed here makes a significant contribution, it documents the evolution, not the emergence, of these themes. Through this structure, it is possible to see how populist leaders reinterpret the same symbolic motifs to adapt to changing psychological and geopolitical demands.

It is of great importance to define the two main analytical ideas that form the basis of this thesis, namely political psychology and populist international relations, explain how they will be applied throughout the thesis, then move on to the theoretical and empirical sections. In this study, “political psychology” refers to an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between psychological processes and political behavior.<sup>7</sup> Political psychology focuses on how political attitudes, leadership philosophies, and group behavior are influenced by cognition, emotion, identity, and personality. Political psychology enables the examination of how discursive framing activates emotional mechanisms such as pride, anger, and fear in the context of populist leadership.<sup>8</sup> The leader’s rhetoric serves as a psychological vehicle that appeals to people’s needs for security and belonging. From this perspective, the study analyzes Erdoğan and Orbán’s foreign policy discourses as a psychopolitical mobilization in which emotional narratives such as pride, victimhood, and sovereignty are transformed into both international and domestic legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, political psychology is viewed as a constitutive aspect of discursive construction rather than an external appendage, illuminating how identity politics interacts with foreign policy choices and how emotions are transformed into political meanings.<sup>10</sup>

In this dissertation, populist international relations refers to the emotional and discursive strategies through which populist leaders reshape the meaning of international politics. It examines how the people/elite conflict at the core of populism reverberates globally, alters international hierarchies, and transforms external actors into moral others.<sup>11</sup> Thus, populist international relations examines how foreign policy becomes a tool for enforcing moral

---

<sup>7</sup> William J. McGuire and Shanto Iyengar, eds., *Explorations in Political Psychology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1941).

<sup>10</sup> Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Arkady R. Wojczewski, “Populism and Foreign Policy,” *Global Affairs* 6, nos. 4–5 (2020): 411–429.

superiority, civilizational difference, and dominant identity.<sup>12</sup> In this approach, international relations is viewed as emotionally charged and discursively constructed, and populist International Relations is treated less as a new theoretical subfield than as a conceptual framework linking poststructuralism and political psychology.<sup>13</sup> Using this framework, the following chapters demonstrate how Erdoğan and Orbán’s foreign policy discourses create *national selves* (Turkish and Hungarian peoples) and international others (EU, West, immigrants) through emotionally charged narratives that combine international identity construction with domestic populism.<sup>14</sup>

The theoretical foundations of both the theoretical and empirical chapters are built by integrating these conceptual frameworks. Positioned at the intersection of international politics, psychology, and rhetoric, the study reveals how populist leaders reimagine foreign policy as a symbolic and emotional act of world-building rather than a purely strategic endeavor. The methodology of the dissertation is thoroughly explained in the third chapter to clarify how the study is structured and operationalized. As will be discussed, employing constructivist and post-structuralist perspectives to interpret the political psychology of populist international relations through the case leaders’ speeches during the election periods will not only provide significant analytical ease but also offer a fresh perspective. Therefore, CDA is chosen as the primary method. By its nature, CDA is a method that progresses through the researcher’s interpretation of selected speeches. Accordingly, as will be elaborated in the methodology section, the populist discourses constructed by the leaders of Hungary and Türkiye during specific election periods within the framework of foreign policymaking will be examined through the lens of the “us” versus “them” dichotomy. While conducting this analysis, the study will explore the objectives behind these discourses and the political-psychological framework within which leaders seek to appeal to voters and secure electoral support. The logic behind the creation of this framework lies in the claim that the populist discourses used by leaders in shaping foreign policy serve two purposes: on the one hand, to influence the construction of international relations, and on the other hand, to ensure continued support from their domestic constituencies.

---

<sup>12</sup> Frank A. Stengel and Dirk Nabers, “Introduction: The Contribution of Laclau’s Discourse Theory to International Relations and International Political Economy,” *New Political Science* 41 (2019): 248–262.

<sup>13</sup> Baumann, “Poststructuralism in International Relations”.

<sup>14</sup> Funda Hisarlıoğlu, Lerna K. Yanık, Umut Korkut, and İdil Civelekoğlu, “Contesting the ‘Corrupt Elites,’ Creating the ‘Pure People,’ and Renegotiating the Hierarchies of the International Order? Populism and Foreign Policy-Making in Turkey and Hungary,” *International Studies Review* 24, no. 1 (2022): viab052, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab052>.

Following the methodology section, the evolution of populism and the leadership trajectories of Orbán and Erdoğan will be examined in chronological order. Subsequently, during the last two general election periods in both countries, populist discourses shaping foreign policy-making processes of Hungarian and Turkish leaders will be analyzed within the framework of the “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Once the case study section is completed, a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between the two countries will be presented. This part will serve both as a summary of the previous sections and as a means to provide the reader with a broader analytical framework to contextualize the findings.

The comparison and analysis sections will be followed by the conclusion. This final section will summarize the core research problems of the study, the methodology employed, and the key insights derived from the research. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to address which aspects remain unexplored and what further research should be conducted to fill these gaps. Thus, the thesis will be brought to its conclusion.

### **A. Data Collection**

The idea of political style is not a modern invention. It has ancient roots, going back to Aristotle, where rhetorical expertise, persuasive presentations, and the effective communication of a political message to secure votes are age-old aspects of politics. Examining style and performance as subjects amenable to analysis through sociolinguistics and discourse analysis is crucial for comprehending the construction of identity.<sup>15</sup>

In democracies, elections are the main method of gaining power, and election campaigns seek to affect the choices made by voters. Being convincing is one of the most important aspects and primary purposes of speeches used by politicians to try to persuade the public to support their programs and cast ballots during the election phase.<sup>16</sup> As a result, they ought to explain how they have addressed certain problems and ideas and clearly state both their own and their political party’s stances.

The research focuses on the 2018 and 2022 general elections for Hungary and the 2018 and 2023 general elections for Türkiye. It has a purpose in terms of the logic of comparative analysis rather than random election years. This study focuses solely on the discourse of the governing

---

<sup>15</sup> Mats Ekström, Maria Patrona, and Joanna Thornborrow, “Right-Wing Populism and the Dynamics of Style: A Discourse-Analytic Perspective on Mediated Political Performances,” *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0101-7>.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (London: Springer, 2011).; Ponton, “Movements and Meanings”.

parties' leaders, and in the Turkish case, the President at the same time, as Erdoğan has a dual role of being both the governing party's leader and the president. The main goal is to objectively assess the impact of the rhetoric of two leaders who both seek to maintain their parties' hold on power. In order to do this, the research primarily looks at the campaign periods leading up to the general elections in the specified years. The discourses analyzed in this study were selected solely from official written transcripts published on the websites of the prime ministries and presidencies of both countries. The statements of the leaders were examined within the framework of foreign policymaking during the election campaign periods, focusing particularly on the excerpts that explicitly articulated the dichotomy of "us and them". These sections were examined using CDA, which, by its nature, provides fertile analytical ground not only for revealing the discursive construction of populist narratives but also for uncovering their underlying political-psychological dimensions.

The elections held on June 24, 2018, were the first general elections in Türkiye in which the Presidential Government System, which was adopted in the referendum on April 16, 2017, and held after the 2016 coup attempt, was put into effect. This situation can be considered as one of the most important elections in Turkish political history<sup>17</sup>, as it includes many new regulations that carry a potential to affect the voting behavior of the voters. The 2023 elections were also an appropriate time to examine the effects of populist discourses on political psychology, as they were held under the shadow of economic depression, earthquakes, and decrees with the force of law issued during the state of emergency.

For Hungary, the 2018 elections were the first general elections to test whether Orbán could regain the dominance his ruling party had lost after 2014, his Fidesz-KDNP alliance lost its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority in early 2015<sup>18</sup>, and whether his anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric would resonate with the public. The 2022 elections, on the other hand, were the important indicators of whether Orbán would be able to win the support of the electorate by portraying a heroic image in the shadow of the Russia-Ukraine war and what kind of country image was going to be created in the heart of Europe for the next four years.

Data collection for this study will be comprehended through the leaders' discourses while making foreign policy decisions during the times of elections. The period will comprehend the

---

<sup>17</sup> Fahrettin Altun, "Laying the Cornerstone for a New Turkey: The June 24 Elections," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): 89–103.

<sup>18</sup> Gergely Szakacs and Krisztina Than, "Hungary's Right-Wing Alliance Loses Two-Thirds Majority," *Reuters*, February 23, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/hungary-s-right-wing-alliance-loses-two-thirds-majority-idUSKBN0LR0JD/>.

last two general election periods specifically. In the frame of this dissertation, the case countries, namely Hungary and Türkiye's leaders for foreign policy decision-making, are Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In democracies, the applicants for foreign policy making are the foreign ministers, yet, as in authoritarian and populist countries, the actual decision maker is the leader of the government party. Therefore, while focusing on the campaign speeches of leaders, the focus is on foreign policy-related discourses. This opens the way to make sense of the political psychology of populist international relations through two example countries. While the study acknowledges the subjective nature of CDA, greater transparency is needed regarding text selection. Speeches were selected based on two main criteria: (1) relevance to foreign policy discourse and (2) inclusion of populist indicators identified in previous literature. However, this manual selection process inherently carries a risk of selection bias. To mitigate this risk, a larger set of texts was examined, and only those speeches that consistently aligned with the theoretical and thematic framework were retained. Future research could implement a more systematic and replicable process, such as inter-coder alignment or peer cross-checking, to increase robustness.

In Hungary, election campaigns officially start 50 days before the election date. Accordingly, the time periods selected for analysis are 17 February - 6 April 2018 and 12 February - 3 April 2022. The official website of the Hungarian Government (*Magyarország Kormánya – Kormányzat Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda*)<sup>19</sup> was used to gather and analyze the Hungarian 2018 election campaign speeches. Due to the limited availability of English speeches, searches were conducted in Hungarian. When an English version was available, it was selected for analysis. In cases where no English translation was provided, speeches were manually translated from Hungarian to English using online translation tools. Since the website does not offer a filtering option by time period, I manually navigated through the pages. Since 30 rows are displayed per page, the first speech covering the election period begins on page 25 (20 speeches) and ends on page 23 (18 speeches), for a total of 68 speeches examined for 2018 campaign period. From this point on, I examined all speeches from the election period, focusing on those related to foreign policy making. Special attention was paid to speeches that included the terms “we” and “them” or expressions that evoke these concepts. Key issues such as Brussels, Soros, and immigration were specifically addressed.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Kormányzat – Miniszterelnök – Hírek*, “Kormányportal”, <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek?items=30&page=1>.

For the 2022 elections, the Government of Hungary<sup>20</sup> website was used again via a different link. Typically, each page contains seven speeches. The first speech in the campaign period starts on page 54 (5 speeches on this page) and ends on page 48 (3 speeches on this page). There are seven rows on each page, so a total of 43 speeches were analyzed following the same procedure as for the 2018 elections. The speeches were manually translated from Hungarian to English if no English version was available. The analysis once again focused on speeches related to foreign policymaking, emphasizing the us-versus-them framework. Key terms such as Brussels, Soros, and migration were considered following the same logic as in 2018 speeches.

As for Türkiye, the campaign period for the 2018 general elections began on May 13, 2018, with the finalization of the candidate lists. A propaganda ban was imposed on June 23, 2018, one day before the election. The speeches made during the campaign period from May 13 to June 23 were analyzed. The first speech is on page 135 (a total of 10 speeches from this page to the end of the relevant section), and the last speech is on page 131 (9 speeches). Each page contains 40 lines; in sum, a total of 139 speeches were examined. These speeches were sourced from the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye<sup>21</sup>. All speeches were analyzed in Turkish and, as in the case of Hungary, translated into English using online translation tools. As in the case of Hungary, speeches related to foreign policymaking were selected, focusing particularly on the terms “we” and “they”. As for the 2023 elections, the campaign period ran from March 18, 2023, to May 13, 2023. Like in the previous election period analysis, Erdoğan’s speeches were gathered from the official presidential website. The first speech for the campaign period is on page 39 (there are 33 speeches on the page), and the last speech is on page 36 (there are 32 speeches). In total, 145 speeches were examined, maintaining the same focus on foreign policymaking and “us and them” associations. Finally, it is important to note that during the analysis of the speeches of leaders from both countries, discourses that made distinctions between us and them and employed polarizing language were excluded from the discourse analysis if they were solely focused on domestic politics—specifically, the main opposition parties and leaders within each country. These sections, however, remain a relevant area for future research and could yield valuable insights. The analysis was rigorously limited to speeches or excerpts that met the two primary criteria of the

---

<sup>20</sup> *Kormányzat – Miniszterelnök – Speciális Hírek*, <https://kormany.hu/kormanyzat/miniszterelnok/specialis-hirek>.

<sup>21</sup> *Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanlığı – Haberler*, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/>.

dissertation: 1. The discourse must be related to foreign policymaking. 2. The discourse must explicitly articulate or implicitly evoke the us and them dichotomy.

All analyzed speeches were originally delivered in Turkish or Hungarian and translated into English for analytical purposes, where English translated texts were not available as pointed out before. The translations were carried out by the bilingual author of this study, who is contextually familiar with the political discourse of both countries. However, translation is never neutral; emotional nuance, rhetorical tone, and symbolic connotations can shift during this process. Some terms (e.g., “*millî irade*” or “*keresztény Europe*”) may not be fully translated and carry deep cultural and emotional weight. This limitation has been acknowledged, and efforts have been made to remain faithful to the original meanings through context-aware translation.

No computer-based programs were used during the collection and analysis of speeches and discourses; the study was conducted entirely manually. While increasingly popular computer-aided methods in discourse analysis techniques may facilitate the process, considering the scope and focus of this study, it is more appropriate to analyze the contexts in which these discourses are communicated to their target audiences rather than examining how frequently leaders use terms such as “we” and “them”. This approach is more compatible with the theoretical frameworks used in this study and provides a deeper focus on the psychological aspects of populist international relations. Furthermore, themes such as fear, heroism, the only solution, and national will, which are not explicitly expressed by leaders but emerge when their speeches are examined, can only be identified through a critical analysis of their discourses. These key elements are essential to understanding how populist leaders construct narratives that emotionally resonate with their target audiences and solidify their political positions.

In the frame of this study, the main point and claim is that domestic politics and foreign policy are intertwined, and leaders use their speeches during foreign policy implications again to get or pursue their support from the electorate. Discourse examples have been chosen from election times. Even though leaders deliver messages to appeal to the people, in the meantime they enforce the foreign policy implications, they use “us” versus “them” dichotomy to draw a frame to make people comprehend whom they should be careful against and whom they should support for the sake of their countries’ integrity. Election times are quite fertile for populist leaders; they can easily find a ground to blame “others” for being the enemy of the pure people. Here, as discussed at the beginning of this study, representative democracy provides an

opportunity for the populist leaders to justify their acts and, by pointing out the ballot boxes, they can subjectify their victory as a “ballot box victory”.

## Analysis

### A. Populism

As discussed in the theoretical section, populism has been portrayed as a contemporary political zeitgeist.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, leaders’ conceptualizations of the phenomenon are the most salient indicators of how their populism operates in any political arena.<sup>23</sup> As noted earlier, emotions and values are not complementary to populism, but rather its primary drivers. Fear, anger, and pride are mobilized to frame political choices as moral imperatives rather than pragmatic decisions. Thus, in both Hungary and Türkiye, populism emerges as an emotional mode of governance that constructs national belonging through shared resentment and perceived injustice. Therefore, comparing Orbán and Erdoğan’s discursive conceptualizations of populism with the findings of the analyses can help to understand the foundations of their populist policies. Thus, one of the supporting research questions is: *why is populist discourse necessary for leaders to maintain power in their countries?* can be answered based on the following comparison.

Erdoğan and Orbán’s discourses contain both opposing and similar elements. To begin with, populism in Türkiye has a longer historical trajectory than the form observed in Hungary today. Erdoğan’s populist discourse has deeper roots in historical narratives. In contrast, Orbán’s populism gained momentum, particularly after the migration crisis of 2015, and shaped its current form.<sup>24</sup> After 2014, Hungary’s domestic political landscape underwent a significant transformation that further shaped the trajectory of Fidesz’s populism. The radical-right Jobbik party, once Fidesz’s fiercest competitor, began to move toward the political center in an attempt to gain broader legitimacy. In response, Fidesz intensified its nationalist, anti-immigrant, and Eurosceptic rhetoric to maintain dominance over right-wing voters. Scholars note that since 2010, Fidesz has closely followed Jobbik’s agenda and often adopted its themes and policy proposals, effectively mainstreaming far-right ideas.<sup>25</sup> This pattern was visible in several key policy areas, such as the 2010 citizenship law extending nationality to ethnic Hungarians

---

<sup>22</sup> Peters and Pierre, “A Typology of Populism”.

<sup>23</sup> Takis S. Pappas, *Populism Emergent: A Framework for Analyzing Its Contexts, Mechanics, and Outcomes*, EUI Working Papers, RSCAS 2012/01 (Florence: European University Institute, 2012), 2, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Viktor Glied, “The Populist Phenomena and the Reasons for Their Success in Hungary,” *Politics in Central Europe* 16, no. 1 (2020): 38, <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0002>.

<sup>25</sup> Kim, “From Mainstream to Extreme.”

abroad, the “Eastern Opening” policy after 2012, and the harsh anti-immigration measures following the 2015 migration crisis.<sup>26</sup> This led to the widespread saying, “what Jobbik says, Fidesz does,” encapsulating how Orbán’s party appropriated radical narratives to consolidate power. By co-opting Jobbik’s discourse, Fidesz gradually transformed into a more radical, illiberal, and anti-EU force within Hungarian politics.<sup>27</sup> A comparable process occurred in Türkiye after 2015, when the AKP’s alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) reinforced nationalist and exclusionary tendencies, moving Erdoğan’s discourse into a more radical field. Though the two developments stemmed from distinct contexts, both demonstrate how right-wing populists instrumentalize ideological competition to justify increasingly nationalist and anti-liberal governance.<sup>28</sup>

Orbán’s discourse is largely framed around anti-immigrant and anti-foreign sentiments.<sup>29</sup> Besides, being a member of the EU has an impact on countries and their leaders. Since Orbán is the leader of an EU member state, the scope of his populism remains relatively limited in its impact. While the EU *acquis* does not directly interfere with the domestic legal systems of its member states, it exerts a significant constraining effect on the policy flexibility of national leaders. Unlike Hungary, Türkiye lacks a supranational body similar to the EU, as well as an effective mechanism to monitor or enforce compliance with such a framework. As a result, President Erdoğan is able to pursue populist policies with greater freedom and autonomy. Therefore, Erdoğan has been in power for over two decades. As discussed earlier in this paper, his political approach has deep historical roots, dating back to Türkiye’s transition to a multi-party system. This long-standing foundation allows Erdoğan’s populism to have a broader and deeper impact in both domestic and international politics.

Through nationalist rhetoric, populist mobilization, the creation of both domestic and foreign opponents, and their parties’ connection to the nation they serve, both leaders have established enduring authority. Despite using similar strategies, aspects of Türkiye’s and Hungary’s populist strategies have been shaped by their respective historical, cultural, and geopolitical histories. Both Erdoğan and Orbán use populism as a governing tool and electoral tactic, sustaining their political power with insistent discourses about existential dangers, cultural identity, and national sovereignty. By identifying himself with the state, populist leaders blur

---

<sup>26</sup> Buzogány and Varga, “The Ideological Context of Hungary’s ‘Eastern Opening’ Policy”.

<sup>27</sup> Enyedi, “Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization”.

<sup>28</sup> Zgut-Przybylska, “Authoritarian Diffusion in Central Europe”.

<sup>29</sup> Glied, “The Populist Phenomena”, 36-38.

the distinction between their personal power and national sovereignty and direct their countries' foreign policy in line with their own populist style of governance.

Crisis narratives are fertile grounds for populist rhetoric. Events like the 2023 earthquake and the 2016 coup attempt are critical to quelling political opposition and strengthening Erdoğan's authority, which will be examined detailed later. In Hungary, migration flows, and the Russo-Ukrainian war have had the same effect during Orbán's election campaign. Crises also have an important impact on populist discourses, as they provide leaders with the opportunity to reaffirm their legitimacy and consolidate their power.<sup>30</sup>

Both leaders portrayed themselves as saviors of the nation and used the crisis events to solidify their positions of authority. The results show that Erdoğan's rhetoric was marked by a strong nationalist tone, the creation of dissidents at home and abroad, and the confusion of his leadership with the identity of the state. Erdoğan first framed the failed 2016 coup attempt to subvert the themes discussed throughout the research. By portraying the failed effort as a turning point and dubbing it "War of Independence 2.0", Erdoğan was able to defend his suppression of the media, civil society, and opposition. Under the guise of national security, this rhetoric has enabled him to legitimize mass purges, increase executive power, and suppress critics. When comparing these two crises, it becomes clear that Erdoğan's rhetoric has consistently transformed national tragedies into political narratives that support his leadership and weaken opposition forces. Similarly, despite significant criticism of the government's poor leadership, its response to the 2023 earthquake focused on preserving national unity under its rule. While the government's response to the disaster was widely criticized, Erdoğan's discourse has emphasized the country's strength and solidarity. The idea that Türkiye could only be rebuilt under his leadership was reinforced by framing the earthquake as yet another national test. Furthermore, the 2023 rhetoric included expressions of gratitude for foreign aid, indicating a deliberate shift in diplomatic orientation, whereas the 2018 rhetoric was mostly critical of international institutions. Orbán used the 2015 refugee crisis to his advantage, portraying migrants as existential threats to Hungarian identity. This resulted in strict immigration laws and the militarization of Hungary's borders. His responses to COVID-19 and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have further highlighted Hungary's need for a strong leader who can withstand external pressure. Both leaders are reinforcing their importance to the country's existence by turning crises into opportunities for political advantage.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 25, 26.

Although both leaders employ populist tactics based on nationalism, crisis management and the instrumentalization of foreign policy, their methods have been shaped differently by their historical backgrounds and geopolitical conditions. Orbán's populism is defensive and Eurocentric, aiming to protect Hungary from liberal Western influence, while Erdoğan's populism is expansionist and Islamist, seeking Türkiye's international legitimacy. Despite their differences, populist models of governance offer important insights into the relationship between populism, political psychology and foreign policy, and provide examples of how leaders use international relations for domestic political survival.

## **B. Perspectives on Elections and People**

Here, while comparing the roles assumed by the two leaders, the sub-research questions of the study, *how does a leader's discourse change in response to electoral concerns, and what impact does this have on foreign policy?* and *how do leaders utilize the populist discursive dichotomy to shape public opinion and international relations?* will be summarized. Following the logic pointed out by Gustave Le Bon<sup>31</sup> nearly two centuries ago, crowds sought consoling rhetoric and the figure of a potential savior. In this context, Orbán and Erdoğan did not neglect to position themselves as saviors of their nations while constructing their discourses during election periods. As will be explained in detail later, both leaders have assigned themselves the duty of protecting their people/masses at all costs against potential dangers they perceive. They have always presented the only way to protect their masses as a condition that they emerge as leaders in the elections. Since the situation outside is *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the nation needs to be strengthened.<sup>32</sup>

The need for a more comprehensive international comparative analysis led the study to choose to focus solely on the general elections. This strategy is further supported by Erdoğan's dual responsibilities as president and head of state. Although Erdoğan is president, he also remains the leader of the ruling party as a result of the amended law. This strategy is also important and valid in Orbán's case due to his role as prime minister of Hungary. Through centralized power, Orbán has shaped Hungary's political landscape as the leader of Fidesz, maintaining firm control over both party and the government. This distinct political system highlights the importance of general elections as a starting point for investigating populist rhetoric and electoral tactics.

---

<sup>31</sup> Le Bon, *Kitleler Psikolojisi*.

<sup>32</sup> Gerim, *Nationalist Discourses in Hungary and Türkiye*.

Erdoğan's discourse equates democracy with elections, a perspective that is also evident in Viktor Orbán's discourse. For both leaders, elections have been critical moments because they serve as the primary mechanism for mobilizing voters. In fact, in populist politics, elections are the primary tool for garnering popular support.<sup>33</sup> Although democracy and right-wing populism may seem contradictory at first glance, populism derives its legitimacy from democratic mechanisms and uses electoral processes to legitimize political discourse and actions.<sup>34</sup>

The idea that populist politicians shape their rhetoric according to voters, especially during election periods, is clearly evident in Erdoğan's speeches. By exploiting domestic problems and linking them to foreign events, Erdoğan not only gains voter support, but also influences international relations and political psychology. His method emphasizes the relationship between domestic and foreign policy in contemporary political strategy, showing how the relationship between domestic policy appeal and international positioning can affect both national politics and international relations. Orbán not only gains support at home but also influences Hungary's foreign policy stance by emphasizing national sovereignty and portraying Hungary as a country where traditional values are protected from external influence. His strategy draws attention to the relationship between domestic political narratives and global positioning, demonstrating how populist leaders use perceived or real external threats to maintain their legitimacy and political dominance.

A key element of Erdoğan and Orbán's rhetoric is the personalization of the leadership with which they bind their states together. Populist politicians, who often present themselves as the sole defenders of national identity and sovereignty, frequently resort to this rhetorical device. Erdoğan's statement that his leadership is organically connected to the destiny of Türkiye, such that any divergent path would cause the country's breakdown, is a reflection of such a dynamic. A clear example of this leadership's personalization can be seen in his statement: "*Türkiye's destiny has become tied to that of the AKP. If we [AKP] stumble, Türkiye will be in trouble*".<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Orbán positions himself as a vital leader required to safeguard Hungary's political, as well as cultural, cohesion. According to Csigó and Merkovity, Orbán has, by doing a "permanent revolution... in the name of the people" converted the state into an "illiberal

---

<sup>33</sup> Dominic Wring, Christiane Grill, Norbert Merkovity, and David Deacon, "Populist Politics and the 'Radical Right' in 2014 Elections," in *Political Advertising in the 2014 European Parliament Elections*, ed. Christina Holtz-Bacha, Edoardo Novelli, and Karen Rafter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 98, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56981-3\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56981-3_7).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99.

<sup>35</sup> Turkish Minute, "President Erdoğan: Turkey's Destiny Tied to AKP's," September 6, 2017, <https://turkishminute.com/2017/09/06/president-erdogan-turkeys-destiny-tied-to-akps/>.

regime”, concentrating power in a fashion weakening checks and balances, while moving it toward centralization around his leadership.<sup>36</sup> This personalization of power is also strengthened by Fidesz’s presentation of itself as a “popular revolt”, not just against external forces, such as the EU, but against domestic elites, placing Orbán not merely as a political leader but as a guardian of the country’s identity.<sup>37</sup>

Orbán frequently contrasts his own experience and determined leadership with what he perceives as weak, externally influenced opponents when criticizing opposition leaders and EU institutions.<sup>38</sup> Erdoğan, in his criticism of at that time opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, emphasizes his extensive interaction with world leaders by contrasting the opposition’s alleged inexperience abroad. Through portraying Brussels and liberal Western elites as enemies seeking to undermine Hungarian sovereignty, Orbán is bolstering his image as a leader determined to resist foreign intervention. His government’s slogans, including “Stop Brussels”, are aimed at strengthening national unity under his leadership, in line with Erdoğan’s use of nationalist rhetoric to rally support. Erdoğan’s message is further reinforced by the language of “one nation, one flag, one homeland”, which emphasizes the unity of the country under his leadership.

The psychological mechanisms outlined in section 2.1, particularly the need for security and belonging, become most pronounced during election campaigns. Both Erdoğan and Orbán use emotionally charged crisis narratives to simultaneously mobilize fear and loyalty. This emotional dichotomy explains why rational economic or institutional arguments often fail to undermine populist support: voters respond to perceived emotional truth rather than empirical reasoning. Both leaders portray elections as vehicles for their continued existence, claiming that in scenarios where the opposition wins the elections, they will lead to cultural degradation, foreign domination, or national collapse. This discourse creates a constant sense of doom and gloom, thus ensuring sustained public support.

### **C. How do the Leaders Position Themselves in International Relations?**

This part followed the sub-question *what is the role of populism and political psychology in foreign policy decision-making processes?* and in a summarizing way the answer was given. The idea that Erdoğan is a savior of all oppressed peoples is a recurring motif in his populist

---

<sup>36</sup> Péter Csígó and Norbert Merkóvity, “Hungary: Home of Empty Populism,” in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, ed. Toril Aalberg et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 299, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623016>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>38</sup> Glied, “The Populist Phenomena”, 40.

foreign policy discourse that distinguishes him from Orbán. Using the idea of the “ummah”, Erdoğan presents himself as a defender of the broader Muslim world<sup>39</sup>; Orbán takes a similar stance, but more limited, emphasizing the protection of “Christianity” and “Christians” in Europe.<sup>40</sup> Erdoğan’s reference to the “ummah” and Orbán’s concept of the Christian community can be contrasted in this way, as both leaders present their leaderships as defending a transnational religious identity.

Erdoğan often accuses Western institutions and international organizations, such as the EU and UN, of being ineffective or biased against Türkiye.<sup>41</sup> Orbán’s rhetoric reflects a similar distrust of such large multinational organizations.<sup>42</sup> By depicting these institutions as the “external other” or “dangerous other”, both leaders use them to warn their countries of internal resistance that they claim is a product of these groups.<sup>43</sup> Liberal principles that support the function of international organizations in resolving disputes and promoting cooperation stand in contrast to this pessimism.<sup>44</sup> Voters who want to feel secure are more likely to support the current government and its leader because the rhetoric used by the leaders may make them concerned about their security.<sup>45</sup> These organizations and their liberal member states criticize both countries for their foreign policy positions. However, such criticism reinforces the populist “us vs. them” divide in their language, which increases their electoral support rather than prompting these governments and leaders to reconsider their actions.<sup>46</sup>

The conscious use of foreign policy discourse not only affects domestic politics but also has broader implications for global affairs.<sup>47</sup> In terms of international relations, populism should be addressed from various perspectives because the populist discourses of modern leaders resemble and interact with traditional international relations ideas. Populist discourse must be examined in a broader context that considers both internal political strategies and international dynamics to fully comprehend the complexities of modern global politics. This study has also

---

<sup>39</sup> Ihsan Yılmaz and Nicholas Morieson, “The Impact of Civilizational Populism on Foreign and Transnational Policies: The Turkish Case,” *Populism & Politics* (European Center for Populism Studies, 2023), 12, <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0022>.

<sup>40</sup> Körösnéyi and Patkós, “Liberal and Illiberal Populism”, 327.

<sup>41</sup> Yılmaz and Morieson, “The Impact of Civilizational Populism”, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Körösnéyi and Patkós, “Liberal and Illiberal Populism”, 329.

<sup>43</sup> Csehi and Zgut, ““We Won’t Let Brussels Dictate Us””, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 516.

<sup>45</sup> Kirk Waldroff, “Fear: A Powerful Motivator in Elections,” *American Psychological Association*, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/fear-motivator-elections>.

<sup>46</sup> Glied, “The Populist Phenomena”, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Özyüksel, “Foreign Policy Decision-Making Processes”.

demonstrated the importance of using CDA to construct and understand the political-psychological framework of populist rhetoric analysis.

The link between foreign policy and national security, that is, the link between domestic security issues, especially terrorism, and international relations is another important dimension of Erdoğan's discourse. Erdoğan constantly claims that he is the only leader who can protect Türkiye from terrorist threats, and he uses this protection to support his domestic and foreign policies. By presenting terrorism as a threat that exists both domestically and internationally, he maintains a narrative that ties his leadership to the survival of the country.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Viktor Orbán's discourse, while focusing primarily on immigration, emphasized the link between external influence and security. Orbán sees immigration, especially from Muslim-majority countries, as a serious threat to Hungary's national security and cultural identity.<sup>49</sup> In the context of EU refugee policy, Hungary's sovereignty is portrayed as under threat from external powers. In this context, Orbán and his administration see themselves as the country's leading protectors, justifying harsh measures at home while taking a defensive and sometimes hostile stance abroad.<sup>50</sup> Both leaders thus reveal how populist tactics blur the lines between domestic and foreign policy, using national security discourses both to legitimize coercive or rebellious positions abroad and to strengthen their influence at home.

While both politicians use foreign policy to advance their own political agendas, their geopolitical stands and strategic partnerships differ. Erdoğan directly incorporates foreign policy into his populist rhetoric, repeatedly referring to Western double standards in international law and global governance. In his statements, he highlights the unfair treatment of Türkiye and portrays the West as a hypocritical force threatening his sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, even when he criticizes the EU, Orbán is more selective in his confrontations. He engages with Brussels skillfully, opposing measures that he believes violate Hungarian sovereignty and secure financial gains. Rather than rejecting Western liberalism outright, his rhetoric emphasizes resistance.<sup>52</sup>

When examining the religious-political discourses of both Erdoğan and Orbán, it can be seen that they combine nationalism with religious identity. In addition, as has been stated many times

---

<sup>48</sup> Yilmaz and Morieson, "The Impact of Civilizational Populism", 4.

<sup>49</sup> Glied, "The Populist Phenomena", 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ákos Bocskor, "Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the 'Crisis' Year: The Orbán Government's 'National Consultation' Campaign of 2015," *Sociology* 52, no. 3 (2018): 564.

<sup>51</sup> Hazır, "Anti-Westernism in Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Foreign Policy", 177.

<sup>52</sup> Visnovitz and Jenne, "Populist Argumentation in Foreign Policy", 694-96.

before, they portray themselves as the protectors of traditional values and national heritage. Erdoğan regularly uses the idea of the ummah or global Muslim community to present himself as the leader of Türkiye and oppressed Muslims everywhere. His rhetoric on Palestine, Syria, and the Muslim world, implying that Türkiye has a divine mandate to defend other Muslims, serves to further solidify his image as an Islamist populist.

In addition to these general trends, comparing the populisms of Orbán and Erdoğan reveals unique thematic focuses that align with the symbolic worlds in which their political narratives operate. While Orbán's anti-Soros campaign has become a central organizing myth in Hungary—a personification of the “globalist elite” that jeopardizes national sovereignty—the anti-Gülen discourse serves a structurally similar purpose in Türkiye, depicting an “enemy within” collaborating with external powers. Both characters function as useful enemies within their leaders' moral universes, acting as proxies for the broader “West vs. us” conflict. Similarly, the discourses surrounding jihadist terrorism and the Russo-Ukrainian War play similar roles in the foreign policy discourses of both countries: Erdoğan sees terrorism as a permanent justification for securitization and centralized power, while Orbán sees the war as proof of Hungary's moral independence from both East and West.<sup>53</sup> Thematically, both populisms employ anti-Western sentiments and identity-building techniques; Erdoğan employs the rhetoric of “Pan-Turkic solidarity” and the “ummah”, while Orbán uses the language of “Christian Europe”. However, their geopolitical manifestations differ: Erdoğan's populism is expansionist and civilizationist<sup>54</sup>, while Orbán's remains defensive and Eurocentric.<sup>55</sup> This thematic comparison demonstrates that moral polarization, marginalization, and identity projection are the same populist mechanisms, but with different symbolic references depending on the cultural and geopolitical context.

Identity and belief systems shape how leaders interpret the international arena. Erdoğan's emphasis on religious solidarity and Orbán's Christian civilizationist rhetoric demonstrate how an emotional attachment to collective identity can translate domestic populism into foreign policy. In this process, emotions such as pride and anxiety become diplomatic tools that link national narratives to international positioning. Orbán advocates a “Christian Europe” against secular liberalism and Muslim immigration, using Christianity as a cornerstone of Hungarian

---

<sup>53</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 88–89.

<sup>54</sup> Yilmaz and Morison, “The Impact of Civilizational Populism”; *Islamist Civilizational Politics and the AKP: Turkey's Role in a Changing Muslim World* (ISP Institute, 2025); “*The AKP's Foreign Policy as Populist Governance*”, MERIP, December 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Bíró-Nagy, “Illiberal Democracy in Hungary”.

identity. He portrays Hungary as the last bastion of Christian civilization against “globalist” elites who seek to undermine national sovereignty. In light of all this, religion plays an important role in both discussions. However, there is an important distinction between them. Christianity is portrayed as a fundamental part of the imagined Hungarian identity in Orbán’s speech. Conversely, due to the Ummah perspective mentioned above, Turkishness is a component of a larger Muslim identity in Erdoğan’s discourse.

The Russo-Ukrainian War, which has spanned recent election cycles in both Türkiye and Hungary, should be considered when evaluating the foreign policy choices made by each nation and their positions in international relations. While Hungarians tend to view Russia as a serious threat due to historical trauma, Turkish people generally do not view Russia as a direct threat—in part because of the lack of Russian hegemonic ambitions over Türkiye during World War II, which was a result of the Turkish government’s foreign policy decisions at the time. Each nation’s foreign policy strategy and the language of its leaders on international security and alliances are affected by these differences in perception of danger. Both Erdoğan and Orbán maintain a practical connection with Russia while using anti-Western rhetoric to rally support domestically. Erdoğan has a complex but practical strategy for dealing with Russia. Although Türkiye remains a NATO member and interacts with Ukraine, he works with Putin on defense and energy related areas. The goal of strategic autonomy is evident in the balancing act between Russia and the West that prevents Türkiye from being fully on the same side as either group.<sup>56</sup> Rather than taking a straightforward pro-Russian stance against Russia, Orbán has adopted a highly pragmatic, multi-layered approach. While he has repeatedly questioned EU sanctions against Moscow and expressed reservations about NATO’s military expansion, these actions stemmed from a broader strategic logic known as the “Eastern Opening” (*Keleti Nyitás*) policy launched after 2012. Within this framework, the Hungarian government aimed to diversify its energy sources, attract Russian investment, and promote Hungary’s image as a dominant actor pursuing a “balanced foreign policy” between East and West. Despite frequent criticism from the EU and Western partners, Orbán frames his ties with Vladimir Putin not as an ideological alignment, but as a pragmatic relationship that serves Hungary’s economic security and national interests.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, Mustafa Kutlay, and E. Fuat Keyman, “Strategic Autonomy in Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Multipolarity: Lineages and Contradictions of an Idea,” *International Politics* (2025): 1–22.

<sup>57</sup> Visnovitz and Jenne, “Populist Argumentation in Foreign Policy”, 694.

Finally, it is essential to address the perspectives of both countries, one explicitly identifying as illiberal and the other exhibiting clear illiberal governance, toward international organizations, which are products of the liberal world order. Erdoğan has mixed attitudes towards international organizations. Until 2023, he had remained deeply skeptical of the United Nations, EU and Western alliances, but in 2023, he thanked foreign aid after the earthquake. His interactions with the EU, NATO and other organizations are transactional and driven by Türkiye's strategic goals rather than ideological disagreement. Orbán has consistently portrayed the EU as a foreign power threatening Hungary's independence. He uses Brussels as a scapegoat for domestic problems and aggressively opposes EU policy on immigration, LGBTQ+ rights and rule of law concerns while remaining in the EU for economic reasons. LGBT issues were also part of Erdoğan's campaign agenda. He accused opposition parties of supporting these "marginalized minority groups" and warned that if they came to power, they would turn the country in a direction that directly contradicted long-established traditional Turkish family values.

#### **D. How is the Distinction Between Us and Them Created?**

In this part, the questions *how are "us versus them" narratives built? Why are these important?* are summarily answered. Following the discussion in the theoretical part, as Bos et al. argue that populist communicators rely particularly on persuasive strategies in which social group cues become more salient, influencing people's judgments of political issues and political participation.<sup>58</sup> This strategy is called "populist identity framing" because ordinary people are perceived as threatened by various outgroups within their own group.<sup>59</sup> Orbán and Erdoğan also construct their populist discourses in this vein, making a distinction between us and them accordingly. According to Tajfel<sup>60</sup>, an external consensus regarding the existence of the group, a cognitive component (or membership knowledge) and an emotional investment in this component are necessary for the definition of any human group. When seen in the emotional involvement in the definition process, both the assignment of value outside oneself and the sense of security associated with the nation become important. The creation of an "us versus them" distinction, central to both leaders' rhetoric, reflects the psychological needs discussed in previous chapters. Fear and anger serve as emotional boundaries, separating the moral

---

<sup>58</sup> Bos et al., "The Effects of Populism as a Social Identity Frame".

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>60</sup> Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Relations," in *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1–14.

ingroup from the corrupt outgroup. This emotional construction of identity underpins the persistence of populism, transforming political opposition into an existential threat.

The ways in which these leaders define and describe their countries are largely different from each other, although the analysis reveals parallels and similarities between the discourses, for example, in the construction of the us and them narratives and in the understanding of the pure people in the international context. In other words, even if they have some common features with populist discourses, they give different answers to the question “who is with us?” In short, when it is compared the definitions of “we” in the discourses, Erdoğan has a more religious and civilizationist line, while Orbán emphasizes the ethnocultural line, emphasizing his cultural ideals and including certain religious and civilizationist parts.

Erdoğan and Orbán describe their supporters as patriotic and pure, creating a parallel moral foundation in their populist rhetoric. Orbán portrays his followers as true patriots defending Hungary’s independence from foreign interference, while Erdoğan portrays them as brave and determined defenders of the nation. The tendency of both politicians to portray their opponents and the foreign countries they claim to support as dangerous “others” serves to further emphasize this moral divide. Rather than discussing those who did not vote for them, however, they frame the opposition and the foreign powers they claim to support as dangerous “others”, positioned as entities separate from the people, existing only to confuse and manipulate the people.

The creation of a binary opposition between “pure people” and “others”, a defining feature of populist politics, is a recurring theme in the campaign rhetoric of both Erdoğan and Orbán. Both presidents have portrayed opposition leaders as internal extensions of foreign enemies and presented themselves and their parties as legitimate representatives of their countries. In contrast, Erdoğan portrays the opposition as a society working with imperialist powers and claims that Türkiye’s sovereignty will be at risk if he leaves office. By portraying the opposition as a tool of external powers, particularly the EU and liberal intellectuals, Orbán is undermining Hungary’s sovereignty and traditional values. Both presidents promote the idea that their leadership is the only line of defense against both internal and external threats and that the future of their countries is at stake.

By presenting themselves as the sole defenders of real people and portraying opposition parties as either internal enemies or agents of foreign interests, both leaders exploit a binary division in society. Especially in light of the 2016 coup attempt and following elections, Erdoğan

portrays his opponents as sympathizers with terrorist groups and Western imperialists.<sup>61</sup> In general, his tone reinforces the idea that Türkiye's sovereignty is at risk by portraying Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the opposition as collaborators with imperialist nations.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Orbán characterizes his opponents as representatives of George Soros, Brussels, and the liberal elite, who oppose Hungarian national interests by advancing EU federalism, immigration, and diversity.<sup>63</sup> His political message focuses on his anti-Soros rhetoric, portraying opposition leaders as "traitors" who have been deceived by external forces.<sup>64</sup>

CDA is a key method for examining how language creates and maintains systems of power and is useful for analyzing the populist speeches of both Erdoğan and Orbán. By focusing on the rhetoric of leaders, Erdoğan and Orbán appear to present their followers as morally correct, in contrast to the other who is often portrayed as internal or external enemies. This concept can be viewed within the framework of neoclassical realism as a way to strengthen the political legitimacy of leaders by promoting national unity in the face of perceived existential dangers. While poststructuralism allows for the exploration of power relations and the production of truths through language, constructivism takes this exploration further by emphasizing the importance of national narratives and shared identities in the construction of political discourse. According to political psychology, by appealing to innate anxieties and fears about sovereignty and national survival, this populist discourse significantly contributes to the formation of the nation's collective attitudes. Both leaders make emotional appeals to their followers and create an atmosphere of fear and unity that strengthens their power by emphasizing external threats and presenting problems as existential. From both theoretical perspectives, it is clear that both leaders used populist rhetoric to influence their countries' international reputations and maintain domestic authority.

In summary, both leaders have used populist governing techniques such as nationalism, establishing external enemies, creating crises, and strategic foreign policy; however, due to their geopolitical contexts and upbringings, their strategies differed. Unlike Erdoğan's expansionist

---

<sup>61</sup> Ece Toksabay and Nick Tattersall, "Erdogan Says Turkey's Coup Script Was 'Written Abroad'," *Reuters*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/erdogan-says-turkeys-coup-script-was-written-abroad-idUSKCN10D1NM>.

<sup>62</sup> Alec Luhn, "Exclusive: The Man Who Could Beat Erdoğan," *TIME*, April 27, 2023, <https://time.com/6274645/exclusive-kemal-kilicdaroglu-turkey-election/>.

<sup>63</sup> Glied, "The Populist Phenomena", 38.

<sup>64</sup> Griff Witte, "Once-Fringe Soros Conspiracy Theory Takes Center Stage in Hungarian Election," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/once-fringe-soros-conspiracy-theory-takes-center-stage-in-hungarian-election/2018/03/17/f0a1d5ac-2601-11e8-a227-fd2b009466bc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/once-fringe-soros-conspiracy-theory-takes-center-stage-in-hungarian-election/2018/03/17/f0a1d5ac-2601-11e8-a227-fd2b009466bc_story.html).

and Islamist populism, which aims for world leadership, Orbán's populism is defensive and Eurocentric, defending Hungarian sovereignty and traditional Christian values. The diversity of ways populism affects political psychology and international relations is illustrated by their different approaches to foreign policy and domestic strategies.

It would be useful to outline the comparison between the two leaders in a table. The table below summarizes the key differences and similarities between Erdoğan and Orbán's populist strategies and highlights how their discourses and foreign policies are shaped by their historical, cultural and geopolitical contexts. In sum, both leaders use populism as a tool to consolidate power domestically and position their countries in a certain way on the global stage.

## **Results**

This study aimed to position populism within the framework of international relations theories. In doing so, it was concluded that populism, as a concept with a weak ideological core, can carve out a place for itself within international relations alongside contemporary theoretical approaches. Additionally, the study highlighted the significant role of political psychology in understanding modern populist international relations. As discussed in this study, emotions, values, beliefs, and identities form the psychological foundations of populist international relations. Recognizing these elements has allowed this dissertation to interpret populism not merely as a communication strategy but also as a system of emotional management that bridges domestic and international politics.

While these concepts alone cannot provide a comprehensive explanation of current global developments, this dissertation proved that, when supported by a potent methodological approach—specifically, CDA—they offer valuable insights. Although many aspects of global politics provide further exploration, it is apparent that the global order shaping international relations is fundamentally structured around individuals, nation-states and their leaders, decision-makers, and within the context of increasing globalization, non-governmental organizations. Therefore, it is useful in reference to both the main research question and the title of this dissertation to examine the political psychology of populist international relations through the discourses of two populist governments and their approaches to foreign policy. This framework offers a proper perspective for understanding the trajectory of right-wing populism, which continues to advance, gaining momentum in contemporary global politics.

The study has shown how populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strategically use foreign policy discourse to strengthen their domestic political power and

influence international opinion. By examining their speeches, especially during election periods when political mobilization is most successful, the study shows how both leaders created a divisive narrative that drew moral lines between “pure people” and “evil others” and often associated domestic opposition with foreign enemies. These discursive frameworks are not just language; they reflect deep-rooted psychological processes such as identity, anxiety, and sense of community. Returning to the emotional mechanisms outlined, the cases of Orbán and Erdoğan reveal how fear, anger, and moral superiority are systematically used to mobilize national sentiments and maintain political authority. These emotions serve as tools that transform political narratives into collective experiences of belonging and threat.

The study combines political psychology with CDA and international relations theories such as poststructuralism, constructivism, and neoclassical realism to offer a multifaceted perspective on how populist leaders approach both domestic and international issues. Both leaders create narratives in which they present themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against a hostile outside world, despite the fact that Hungary and Türkiye have quite different historical, political and geographical positions. This confirms the theoretical claim that values and beliefs serve as interpretive filters through which societies perceive external threats. In both cases, these beliefs maintain the moral distinction between “us” and “them” and demonstrate how identity and emotional cognition shape international behavior. To appeal to the unique political and historical sensibilities of both nations, these narratives are supplemented by references to religion, culture and national identity.

Emphasizing the examples of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, this dissertation examined how populist politicians use foreign policy discourse to mobilize people and retain political power during election periods. The research aimed to expand the knowledge of populism in international relations by adopting an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining constructivism, post-structuralism and neoclassical realism. The involvement of political psychology provided further insight into how leaders construct and control identity-based narratives to evoke strong emotions and reinforce the “us and them” divide. The results suggest that populist foreign policy is not an isolated area, but rather a well-planned extension of a broader populist logic that reframes national interests through emotionally and philosophically compelling narratives. This fusion of foreign policy and domestic political strategy is a sharp departure from traditional diplomacy and provides an important lens for understanding how populist governments have changed in the twenty-first century.

By focusing on specific election periods, it was possible to examine the change of populist discourse and the recontextualization of lasting themes such as identity formation, externalization of threats, and anti-Western sentiment across various elections. This approach treated populism not as a static set of ideas but as an evolving process of transformation. A thematic comparative approach focusing on specific symbolic clusters, such as pan-Turkish narratives, Islamist terrorism, or Soros/Gülen, could provide valuable insights. Consequently, this study could be expanded in the future by combining thematic and chronological analyses to examine how populist discourse has evolved over time in response to internal and external factors. This allows researchers to examine how populist communication has changed over time and its impact on international legitimacy, identity politics, and politics.<sup>65</sup>

This study has offered a practical definition of populist foreign policy. It considers this approach as a strategic way of using rhetoric. This practice blends domestic political objectives, such as winning elections, with how a country positions itself on the world stage. All of this is evident in the case of Türkiye and Hungary. Populist foreign policy does not adhere to the usual rules of diplomacy. Instead, it transforms rhetoric into a storytelling tool. Leaders use rhetoric to deflect blame, build a national sense of self, and maintain a sense of ongoing crisis. Things like stirring up emotions are crucial here. Similarly, identifying external enemies that mirror internal enemies is crucial. Furthermore, foreign policy involves a form of personal loyalty to a single leader. Populist foreign policy aims to garner domestic support. It does this by reshaping the perspective on global ties. This perspective emerges through conflicting ideas, ambiguous rights and wrongs, and symbolic politics. The speeches of Erdoğan and Orbán demonstrate this in action.

In order to study how populist leaders use discursive methods, the study used CDA as the main methodological tool and also took into account aspects of political psychology. Drawing particularly on several publications by van Dijk<sup>66</sup> and Chilton<sup>67</sup>, the speeches have highlighted the sociolinguistic aspects of discourse analysis, revealing how Orbán and Erdoğan shape “us versus them” narratives and how populism operates within the right-wing leadership of Türkiye and Hungary. Through the integration of political psychology, the study was able to trace how language encodes emotional and identity-based cues such as fear, pride, anger, and collective grievance, transforming discourse into political persuasion. According to the method chosen in

---

<sup>65</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”.

<sup>66</sup> van Dijk, “Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis”; van Dijk, “Discourse and Manipulation”.

<sup>67</sup> Chilton, *Analyzing Political Discourse*.; Chilton, “The Straw Man in Political Discourse”.

CDA, the aim was to reveal the functioning of semantic networks and patterns in the discourses under consideration, rather than focusing on grammatical aspects and problems. The official campaign speeches of Orbán (2018, 2022) and Erdoğan (2018, 2023) served as the basis for the comparative studies. Most importantly, these statements were taken directly from official government and presidential websites to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the discourse under study. As a result, translation issues and interpretative biases were eliminated, and CDA could be applied more consistently and objectively.

The study's theoretical and methodological approach contributes to literature in another respect. The research highlights the emotional and symbolic components of populist leadership by critically analyzing the discourse through the lens of political psychology. This study demonstrates how populist leaders use carefully crafted narratives to manipulate political attitudes by appealing to pride, resentment, and fear, in contrast to most traditional approaches that only consider institutional or political variables. Such emotional mobilization is most evident during election periods, when populist rhetoric flourishes and leadership seeks to bolster its legitimacy and ensure electoral survival. The cyclical interaction between fear and anger allows populist leaders to maintain a constant sense of crisis. This mechanism functions as both a psychological and rhetorical strategy, resolving the central dilemma of this research: How do emotions support populist legitimacy in domestic and international arenas? As previously discussed, Erich Fromm's concept of authoritarian personality offers a useful psychological lens for understanding this phenomenon. The feelings of fear and uncertainty that Fromm identified as the primary drivers of people's attraction to authority lie at the heart of the contemporary populist appeal of leaders like Erdoğan and Orbán. In line with Fromm's insights in *Escape from Freedom*<sup>68</sup>, individuals facing alienation and social fragmentation often seek psychological security in powerful leaders who promise unity and order. Populist discourse exploits this emotional need by constructing polarized narratives of "us and them", offering belonging and identity in exchange for autonomy. These dynamics explain how populist leaders, particularly in times of crisis, can transform emotional distrust into political loyalty.

According to the study, both leaders frequently employ emotionally charged dichotomies such as "pure people" and "evil others", in which the "others" are often portrayed as domestic opposition supported by hostile external forces. Election periods, which are critical times for populist leaders to reaffirm their legitimacy and win over people, are when such narratives

---

<sup>68</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*.

become most evident. Erdoğan's securitization of terrorism and Orbán's portrayal of migration as a danger to civilization are examples of how foreign policy discourse is reinterpreted for political purposes. Despite their different discursive approaches, both leaders develop overly simplistic worldviews that reduce complex global processes to existential dangers in order to protect their continued dominance.

This study highlights the under-researched connection between populism and political psychology in international relations. Understanding the psychological dimension of populist discourse – through identification, terror, and crisis framing – is crucial to understanding how these leaders play on the emotional demands of their supporters. The moral and emotional dimensions of populism explain why rational or institutional approaches alone cannot explain its durability. Emotions provide the connective tissue between ideology, leadership, and collective belief. Moreover, by situating the study within a foreign policy framework, the dissertation contributes to a growing body of work that recognizes the importance of combining international relations theory with discursive and psychological methods to fully understand the breadth of contemporary populism.

This dissertation has demonstrated that populist discourse is not merely a political tendency but also a structural necessity for populist leaders to maintain power, particularly in hybrid regimes where informal control and formal institutions coexist. Populist leaders regularly invoke threats, crises, and identity boundaries to foster emotional loyalty and fear-based commitment among their followers. These symbolic and emotional techniques create a narrative that presents the leader as the sole guardian of the nation's existence, delegitimizing dissent and restricting the space for dispute. Thus, populist rhetoric serves as a tool for political mobilization and power generation, increasing the leader's place both domestically and internationally.

In this dissertation it was argued that populist foreign policy should not be viewed merely as an aberration or disruption of the liberal international order. Instead, it should be viewed as a carefully constructed strategic discourse deeply embedded in both domestic political considerations and broader global identity issues. As populist leaders such as Erdoğan and Orbán continue to exert influence on international relations, future research should delve deeper into the various dimensions of populism. This involves not only examining power dynamics and institutional factors, but also analyzing how discourse, identity formation, and emotional appeals play an important role in shaping foreign policy decisions. Through highlighting the importance of political psychology and foreign policy in populist discourse, this dissertation brings a different perspective to the study of populism. It highlights the need to expand existing

knowledge on populism to include broader geopolitical conditions and move beyond Eurocentrism. It also shows how populist politicians use the language of crisis and security to advocate tough action, silence critics, and maintain power. Thus, the findings of this study not only provide insights into how populist leaders use foreign policy as a domestic tool for political mobilization but also expand the theoretical understanding of populist international relations.

Although this dissertation focused on the populist rhetoric of incumbent leaders during election periods, it deliberately excluded a detailed analysis of opposition parties and leaders in both Türkiye and Hungary in order to provide a focused analytical scope.

## List of Author's Publications

### Journal Articles

1. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Populism in Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process." *Eurasian Journal of Researches in Social and Economics* 8, no. 1 (2021): 146–160.

Language: English

2. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Free Trade Between Turkey and the EU in the Frame of Customs Union." *Comparative Law Working Papers* 6, no. 1 (2022): 7 pages. Full text:

[https://www.ojji.u-szeged.hu/images/dokumentumok/CLWP/Bsra\\_Free\\_Trade.pdf](https://www.ojji.u-szeged.hu/images/dokumentumok/CLWP/Bsra_Free_Trade.pdf)

Language: English

3. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Political Psychology of Türkiye-EU Relations." *Central European Political Science Review* 24, no. 91 (2023): 85–99.

Language: English

Nemzetközi és Fejlődéstanulmányok Doktori Bizottság HASSELIX NFDB [1901-] – B hazai Politikatudományi Bizottság HASSELIX PTB [1901-] – C hazai

### Conference Proceedings

4. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Political Communication and Populism: The Case of Europe." In *TUIÇ Uluslararası Öğrenci Kongresi 5–6 Mart 2022: Full Text Book*, edited by Mustafa Burak Şener, Büşra Özyüksel, and Burak Yalım, 27–36. Kütahya: TUIÇ Akademi, 2022.

Language: English | ISBN: 9786057284907

5. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Popülizmin Devletler ve Liderler Arası İlişkilerdeki Yeri." In *9. Hitit Öğrenci Kongresi*, edited by İsmail Yıldırım, 158–158. Çorum: Hitit University, 2023.

Language: Turkish | ISBN: 9786055244293 | Full text

6. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Political Psychology of Turkey-EU Relations." In *Avrupa çalışmaları: Türkiye, AB ve ötesine ilişkin perspektifler – lisansüstü öğrenci konferansı bildiri özeti kitabı*, edited by Didem Balathoğulları, Aslı Aydın Sancar, and Ayhan Kaya, 44–45. Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University, 2021.

Language: English | ISBN: 9786053995159

7. Özyüksel, Büşra. "Foreign Policy Decision-Making Processes in the Frame of Populism: Cases of Türkiye and Hungary."

In *International Congress on Afro-Eurasian Research VII*, edited by Hakan Arıdemir, Adriatik Derjaj, Burak Yalım, and M. Burak Şener, 55–82. Istanbul: TUIÇ Akademi, 2024.

Language: English | ISBN: 9786057284969

### Chapters in Books

8. Merkovity, Norbert, and Büsra Özyüksel. "Political Communication and Populism." In *European Politics – Crises, Fears, and Debates*, edited by Zoltán Simon and Dezső Tamás Ziegler, 138–151. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2022.

Language: English | ISBN: 9782140265327

9. Özyüksel, Büşra. “Göç Olgusunun ‘Yükselmesinde’ Medya Etkisi.” In *Yükselen Bir Politika Alanı Olarak GÖÇ*, edited by Pelin Sönmez and İtir Aladağ Görentaş, 105–126. Ankara: Nobel Academic Publishing, 2021.  
Language: Turkish | ISBN: 9786254171895