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

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## INTRODUCTION

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” (Nadesan & Ron, 2020; Rooduijn, 2014). In contrast, at the international level, it often displays itself as resistance to global norms and institutions (Metawe, 2020, p. 205). 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>1</sup> and Hungary as case studies are examined. To settle populism within the wider field of international relations, this study stands on three theoretical perspectives namely, neoclassical realism, constructivism, and poststructuralism. These theories offer corresponding insights into how populism operates as both a political and psychological phenomenon in the international arena. Neoclassical realism offers a structural lens that focuses on how systemic constraints and domestic political factors interact to shape state behavior (Rathbun, 2008; Lobell et al, 2009). Constructivism emphasizes the significance of socially constructed identities, beliefs, and norms (Checkel, 1998; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001) in understanding the motivations and strategies of populist leaders. Finally, poststructuralism highlights the role of discourse in challenging established narratives and power structures and in constructing alternative views of international politics (Stengel & Nabers, 2019; Baumann, 2022). These theories provide a potent framework for analyzing the complicatedness of populist international relations.

Neoclassical realism, which utilizes realist precedents, emphasizes the centrality of power and security in international relations (Rose, 1998, p. 147). However, contrary to classical realism, which ascribes conflict to human nature (Bell, 2017; Korab-Karpowicz, 2010), or structural realism, focusing merely on systemic pressures (Rathbun, 2008), neoclassical realism includes

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<sup>1</sup> The country name “Turkey” has been changed to “Türkiye” at the UN (<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.

the domestic political environment in its analysis. Populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye exemplify this interplay between domestic and international dynamics. Both leaders draw on domestic political narratives that focus on national sovereignty, cultural identity and resistance to foreign intervention to legitimize their foreign policies. This alignment between domestic political imperatives and international strategies highlights the usefulness of neoclassical realism in explaining the behavior of populist states. By framing international organizations and liberal global norms as threats to national sovereignty, populist leaders position themselves as protectors of their nations in an anarchic and competitive international system (Neuman, 2020).

In contrast, constructivism shifts the focus from material power to ideational factors such as shared beliefs, collective memories, and socially constructed identities (Wendt, 1999; Theys, 2022). This perspective is particularly important for understanding how populist leaders mobilize support through narratives that emphasize historical grievances, cultural exceptionalism, and existential threats. For example, both Erdoğan and Orbán have drawn on collective traumas, such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire or Hungary's struggle against foreign domination, to construct narratives of national revival and resistance. These narratives resonate deeply with their voters, fostering a sense of unity against perceived "others". Constructivism also emphasizes the fluid and contested nature of identities and interests in international relations and is consistent with the tendency to redefine these concepts to serve their own political agendas (Wendt, 1999, p. 2). By focusing on the socially constructed nature of international politics, constructivism provides a valuable lens through which to analyze how populist leaders adapt their strategies to changing domestic and international conditions.

Last but not least, poststructuralism challenges the foundations of international relations by deconstructing the discourses and power dynamics that sustain the international order (Weldes, 2000; Epstein, 2013). By focusing on how leaders use language and symbolism to create and legitimize their power, this theory is particularly useful for examining the performative aspects of populist foreign relations. Populist leaders are skilled at constructing binary oppositions, such as "us" and "them" or "the people" and "the elite" to rally support and weaken their opponents (Wodak, 2017; De Cleen, 2019). For example, Orbán's opposition to the European Union (EU) and Erdoğan's criticism of Western hegemony illustrate a larger populist tactic of rejecting existing institutions and norms in favor of alternative narratives of sovereignty and self-determination. Poststructuralism's emphasis on discourse and power dynamics provides a

deeper understanding of how populist leaders seek to reshape the international system to reflect their ideological priorities.

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.

Since the discussion revolves around the political psychology of populist international relations, it would be appropriate to start by defining political psychology, progressing from the specific to the general. After introducing political psychology within a historical framework, the definition and variations of populism will be examined. By using a method within the scope of the international relations theories mentioned above, the question of how populist international relations can be placed within these theoretical frameworks will be addressed and an attempt will be made to position it among these theories. Following this, the central research question guiding the dissertation is: How can one make sense of the broader dynamics of populist international relations from a political psychology perspective in terms of the foreign policy discourses of populist leaders?

Subsequently, a separate chapter will be dedicated to the political psychology of populist international relations. The reason for this is to examine the core problematic independently from the theoretical framework, in line with the thesis title, and to prepare the reader for the methodology section of the study. By analyzing the political psychology of populist leaders, the

cases of Türkiye and Hungary will be explored. Accordingly, building on the question “in what ways does political psychology deepen the understanding of populist international relations making?”, this section aims to highlight the mutual interaction between populism and political psychology in global affairs.

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.

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.

## CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1. Political Psychology

The multidisciplinary field of political psychology focuses on the interaction between psychological and political processes. Early political theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, who investigated aspects of human nature related to political action, can be considered pioneers of this field (Murchison, 1929; Isaac, 2013). From the 20th century onwards, political psychology began to gain importance as a separate academic field of study, especially as researchers sought to understand the psychological basis of political behavior, decision-making, and leadership as a result of major and devastating wars. The fact that all political worldviews are ultimately shaped by an understanding of human nature clearly shows that political psychology has a history as old as politics (Çalışkan, 2021). Aristotle refers to the fact that humans are naturally political. Similarly, Plato argues that a competent political system can only be built by taking into account the psychological characteristics of human beings. Likewise, Farabi, referencing Aristotle, defines humans as “a social and political animal” (Osmanoğlu, 2019). The concept of “human nature” constitutes the starting point of political philosophies built on the assumptions of the “natural state” (Houghton, 2014). For example, Hobbes emphasizes the evil and deceitful tendencies of human beings. In contrast, political philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau developed their thought systems by focusing on the natural goodness of human beings (Osmanoğlu, 2019).

The great thinkers of ancient Greece believed that political life could not be fully understood without an understanding of human nature. For centuries, leading philosophers consistently placed psychology at the center of their analyses of social and political life. Following in their footsteps, Harold Lasswell emphasized the critical role of modern depth psychology in understanding politics (Ascher & Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2004). The professional connections Lasswell sought to establish between psychology and politics attracted attention in the field. Even before Lasswell’s efforts, thinkers such as Graham Wallas, who also mentored Lasswell, had made human nature a central element in political analysis, albeit in a different way (Roazen, 2003). Erich Fromm’s research on the idea of the “authoritarian personality” shows how people can follow authoritarian leaders out of fear and uncertainty. This explains why populist leaders often garner so much support. Fromm’s “escape from freedom” (1941) argument explains why individuals seek consolation in harmony in today’s more estranged society. Populist leaders exploit this need for security by polarizing people on the basis of a different narrative of us



versus them. Fromm's analysis of how social conditions affect political behavior reveals how populist movements play on people's basic psychological needs for security and acceptance. This paradigm sheds light on the psychological processes underlying populism, especially in times of crisis, and shows how leaders like Erdoğan and Orbán use these strategies to influence and manipulate the views of their supporters.

As Segall (1976) aptly observed, the "real world" serves as the ultimate laboratory for psychologists. From this perspective, his investigation into whether understanding the mechanisms behind human behavior is important to anyone beyond the field of psychology can be seen as one of the early efforts to connect human behavior to the political world and its broader application in the real world. Political psychology is an interdisciplinary area that is relatively new to the world. Although it is not actually newly discovered, its place in literature in terms of terminology has taken place in the last century. Political psychology, which is an interdisciplinary science and institutionalized (Ersaydı, 2012, p.40) with the International Society for Political Psychology (ISSP in short), first established in 1978 by the professor of psychiatry Jeanne N. Knutson. Political psychology is an academic field that deals with the interplay between psychological and political processes. Extending beyond psychology and politics in its interdisciplinary dimension, political psychology began to emerge as a field of study in the 1920s and developed after the 1970s (Özyılmaz & Bağcı, 2013). It is a dynamic field of research which offers a unique mix of approaches and methods in the social and cognitive sciences. Political psychologists explore interactions between macro-level political structures and micro-level factors such as decision-making, motivations and perceptions (Stone et al., 2014).

Asking why people do what they do (Lupia et al., 2000) and trying to find answers to these questions paved the way for the development of psychological studies in political science. One of the greatest difficulties inherent in the answers to such questions is that the thoughts that preceded a choice cannot be observed concretely. Kuklinski (2002) asks what political psychology is, and he defines it as the study of internal processes underneath political finding and decision-making. Kuklinski quoted Sullivan, Rahn, and Rudolph; political psychologists have intensely used psychoanalysis to examine elites and data processing to examine citizens. Values and belief structures, personality, and international affairs occur most commonly, accompanied by intellect, political culture, identification, and leadership. Political psychology represents the empirical standing of many of its social science members in this respect. The branch of political psychology has a long past and a general apprehension. It comprises a wide

variety of theories, ways, quantitative and qualitative research methods, and verdicts (Kuklinski, 2002, p. 23). William McGuire (1993) classified the history of political psychology as proceeding through “three cycles”. The first cycle (the 1940s and 1950s) he defined as overshadowed by analyzing personality and culture. Through the 1960s and 1970s, the second cycle was described as concentrating on political approaches and voting behavior. The third cycle of the 1980s and 1990s is dominated by intensity on political ideology and belief systems (Iyengar & McGuire, 1993).

Since McGuire introduced his classification more than thirty years ago, political psychology has moved in new and important directions. While his three-cycle model provided a useful foundation, more recent developments suggest that the field has grown far beyond those initial boundaries. The ways in which emotions, identity, and unconscious processes influence political behavior are increasingly receiving attention from researchers; these issues were not central to previous cycles. Insights from moral psychology (Nicoletti & Delehanty, 2017) and neuroscience (Spezio & Adolphs, 2007; Jost et al, 2014; Haas et al, 2020) have expanded knowledge of how people engage with politics. The digital age has also introduced new dynamics and challenges, particularly in light of the impact of social media, online polarization (Bliuc et al, 2021; Tucker et al, 2018), and algorithm-driven content. These changes could be called a possible fourth cycle that captures the emotional, cognitive, and technical complexity of contemporary politics.

The contributions of psychology to politics come from the determination of interpersonal engagements, persistent motivations, knowledge, reasoning, perceptions of emotions and related aspects of the political world, as well as its affiliates, and its effect on what individuals seek (Berinsky et al., 2004, p. 969). The Oxford Manual of Political Psychology (2013) defines political psychology at the most general level as applying what is known about human psychology to policy research. The areas of benefit of political psychology emerge as theory and research on biopsychology, neuroscience, personality, psychopathology, evolutionary psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and intergroup relations. Political psychology, which addresses political elites, their personalities, motives, beliefs, and leadership styles, and their judgments, decisions, and actions regarding domestic politics, foreign policy, international conflict, and conflict resolution, as well as voting, collective action, the impact of political communication, political socialization and civic education is also concerned with the dynamics of mass political behavior, such as group-based

political behavior, social justice, and the political unification of immigrants (Huddy et al., 2013, p. 1).

Political psychologists examine the interactions between macro-level political structures and micro-level factors such as decision-making processes, motivations, and perceptions (Stone et al., 2014). Political psychology developed dramatically in the post-World War II period. The researchers wanted to explain how ordinary, well-adapted members of Western society could handle the persecution in concentration camps. Racism and discrimination have motivated researchers to investigate the psychological profile that motivates people to maintain racist power structures and has also led to influential theories such as the authoritarian personality, whose roots define the Nazi authoritarian character but are used to explain traditional authoritarianism and racism in the United States. Psychological analysis and other case studies in psychobiographies have also been applied to political leaders at the individual level (Stone et al., 2014).

The research field is essentially concerned with the behavior of individuals within a particular political system. Psychology alone fails to explain the Holocaust, stubborn conflicts, war, or much of the other behavior of states or collective political actors in complex environments. Individuals' behaviors change and respond to differences in political institutions, political cultures, leadership styles, and social norms (Huddy et al., 2013, p. 3). Political psychology evaluates the psychological factors that play a role in these relations by considering the interactions between large groups, masses, and nations (Çevik, 2008). In 1950, Adorno's combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and assessment techniques, making a groundbreaking contribution to political psychology. To better connect psychology and political behavior, this work also developed the F-scale personality test, which became a fundamental tool for assessing people's authoritarian tendencies (Adorno, 1950). This focus makes it a key area of study in the field of international relations. As can be understood from the definitions, political psychology has both a national and an international context.

When the relations between states within the discipline of international relations and the processes that shape these relations are examined, it can be easily seen the behaviors and attitudes that manifest as a reflection of human psychology. The fact must be contemplated that decision makers, as human beings, pass through a filter from the house they were born into to the neighborhood they grew up in, the institutions they received education from, and the types of books they read. This process is influential in the formation of their personalities and shapes the course of their lives. In this context, the approaches that do not put the states, therefore the

“human”, who is the founding actor of the international system, at the center; without examining the cultural values of societies and the historical processes that reflect these values, the paradigms that they will put forward in international relations were and will not be sufficient (Şabap, 2021). As a matter of fact, it has been argued in the social sciences community for a while that rooted theoretical approaches such as realism, liberalism, and idealism are not sufficient in solving problems. At this point, contrary to classical theories, political psychology not only offers an interdisciplinary perspective, but also reveals the need for discipline in a wide area that will enable a healthy analysis of events and phenomena that are described as complicated.

International studies are concerned with the study of issues, whereas international relations is concerned with the application of ideas to explain relationships, usually between nations, but more recently also between other social groupings (Beyer, 2017). International relations is a social science that works with both societies and people. As a result, there is ongoing cross-pollination between the other social sciences and international relations. For instance, constructivism, a key new approach, has drawn substantially from sociology, from which it uses ideas and concepts to offer a better understanding of global social processes. Philosophy and economics, on the other hand, have impacted realists. It is normal for international relations, as a new study, to be inspired by theories and concepts from other social sciences, which frequently deal with analogous concerns of conflict and collaboration, as well as peace and aggression among humans. Psychology is fundamentally a social science study, like international relations; hence, the major focus of analysis for both psychology and international relations is the person, groups of individuals, and the social impacts they cause via their interactions (Beyer, 2017).

Theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, or Machiavelli openly discussed human nature issues related to political psychology, although there was no such discipline during these philosophers' time. Values, belief structures, personality and international affairs occur most commonly, accompanied by intellect, political culture, identification, and leadership. Political psychology represents the empirical standing of many of its social science members in this respect (Monroe et al., 2009, p. 860). In this context, Gustave Le Bon stands out as an important figure due to his early examination of various aspects of mass psychology and collective behavior, which are essential for understanding the dynamics of populist leadership. His sense of social consciousness has endured despite widespread criticism, particularly of his views on race and his disdain for revolutionary, particularly the French Revolution, change. Le Bon's concept of collective consciousness was controversial. In his work *Psychologie des foules*, he explored the

dynamics of mass movements, especially in the context of the French Revolution. Le Bon analyzed how mass gatherings led to the erosion of individual critical thinking and logic, emphasizing the psychological factors influencing collective behavior (Le Bon, 1895/2018). His outlook on society can be summarized as follows:

*The crowds have never thirsted for the truth. Faced with the evidence that displeases them, they turn away, preferring to deify the error, if the error seduces them. Whoever knows how to delude them is easily their master, who tries to disillusion them is always their victim* (Gustave Le Bon, 1895/2018, p. 67).

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, can be a useful tool to analyze a society. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, stated in his *Unrest of Civilization (Das Unbehagen in der Kultur)* that psychoanalysis is a suitable theory in explaining social events, the development, and problems of civilization. According to Freud, it is tragic that human beings who are motivated by animal instincts try to become civilized beings at the same time. However, Freud also acknowledges that man cannot give up civilization (Freud, 1930/2019). From this point of view, today's global order seems both against but also a natural result of the will of people's improvements.

Considering the fact that today politics is done through perceptions, it is possible that the most accurate definition of political engagement is the art of perception management (Singh et al., 2023). When seeking a political solution to many national and international conflicts in contemporary age, perception operations are frequently used. Given that politics is analyzed over events, facts, actors, and processes, it can be easily understood how important psychology is at every stage. The factors that affect the policy maker in decision-making processes, the reflection of the decisions taken on the societies, the manipulation of written, visual and virtual media in terms of politics, asymmetric wars, intelligence moves that lead to disinformation, tactics and strategies aiming to shape the next step should be examined primarily through the discipline of psychology (Houghton, 2009). Political ideologies that try to analyze the already quite complex world in the period we live in with perception-selectivity based on certain pre-determined presuppositions are also directly related to psychology (Jost et al., 2009).

Human behavior is one of the most important and fundamental concepts in politics as in psychology. Certain verbal or behavioral contents direct individuals and masses against events and facts (Kansu & Tarhan, 2018), therefore, today's studies of political science and psychology have come across in political psychology (Kansu & Tarhan, 2018, p. 3). Political psychology is

a discipline that can affect all social disciplines and underlie them, especially when media and policy issues are considered (İnan, 2015, p. 8). Political psychology distinguishes between real events and psychological interpretations of these incidents. The former mainly has objective reasons, but psychological causes also contribute to the outcome of the event. The resulting happening then affects the psychology of society, creating a vicious circle (Aktan, 2006, p. 299). The study of political psychology examines the psychological processes that underlie relationships among large groups, societies, and countries. It also looks at the relationships between these groups and their leaders and the interactions between leaders nationally and worldwide.

Populist leaders' use of strategies such as media manipulation and group concerns to influence electoral support and shape foreign policy narratives is similar to the impersonal influence that shapes political behavior as noted by Mutz (1998). These results suggest broader applications of political psychology in the populist international, where a leader's authority can be deliberately enhanced by exploiting the concepts of "us" and "them". Political communication and political psychology are integral to life. They cover topics such as leader communication, rhetoric, and sources of intergroup, international, or ethnic conflicts. These fields also examine political discourse, party manifestos, and persuasive communication techniques. They address issues like political gender discrimination, immigrant psychology, and government risk communication mechanisms. Additionally, they tackle problems in ensuring democratic electoral participation. Political communication and psychology also involve the use of the internet and new technologies during elections, as well as the semiotic meanings behind political party logos (İnan, 2015, p. 11). Consequently, political psychology contributes to understanding global affairs, the ways in which populist leaders shape international relations, and, most importantly, how they appeal to voters.

## **1.2. Populism<sup>2</sup>**

Populism has been one of the top topics which is worked on by many academics. The term is used to define left-wing presidents in Latin America, right-wing parties in Europe, and both left-wing and right-wing presidential candidates in the United States of America (Kaltwasser,

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<sup>2</sup>This part of the study is mainly based on the author's earlier articles namely: Özyüksel, B. (2021). Populism In Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process. *Avrasya Sosyal ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(1), 146-160. & Özyüksel, B. (2023). Foreign policy decision-making processes in the frame of populism: Cases of Türkiye and Hungary. In *International Congress on Afro-Eurasian Research VII Proceedings* (pp. 53–75). Tirana.

2017). Populism was a peasant movement in the 1890s (Müller, 2016). It is based on the United States farmers' movement that resisted capital sovereignty at the end of the century; it initiated the struggle against low credit policies, agricultural cooperatives and demands for participatory democracy and pioneered the establishment of the Populist Party of 1892. In political science, it describes the Russian Narodniki as a populist movement, advocating agricultural socialism that fought against tsarism and industrial capitalism in the second half of the 19th century. On the other hand, the idea of seeing populism as a “progressive” or “grassroots” movement is mostly based on America (north, central, and south). Another provision on populism is valid in Europe based on historical conditions. There populism is associated with irresponsible political propositions and political evils by liberal commentators (demagogism and populism are mostly interchangeable terms). While it is seen as populist movements close to fascism in Central and Eastern Europe; in the 1930s, representatives of the poor in Latin America were gaining strength (Müller, 2017, p. 105).

Populism has been described based on political, economic, social, and discursive characteristics (as cited in Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013 Weyland, 2001). It is examined by using numerous theoretical perspectives — including structuralism, poststructuralism, modernization theory, social movement theory, party politics, political psychology, political economy, and democratic theory — archival research, discourse analysis, and formal various methodological approaches such as modelling (as cited in Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013 Acemoglu et al., 2011; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Canovan, 2002, Hawkins, 2009, Goodliffe, 2012, Postel, 2007). The notion has been portrayed as a contemporary political zeitgeist (Peters & Pierre, 2020). It makes sense to emphasize populism's ubiquity to some extent, as manifestations of discontent reflect populist sentiments—specifically, the claim of a virtuous people rebelling against a corrupt and ineffective elite (Mudde, 2004).

The difficulty of defining populism stems from the fact that the term has been used to define political movements, parties, ideologies, and leaders in geographical, historical, and ideological contexts. There is a general consensus in comparative literature that populism is confrontational, chameleon-based culture and context (Arter, 2010); the challenge, then, is to grasp how culture and context give form populist politics and, in turn, how populism affects political shift. It is challenging to find a common ideological denominator that binds the numerous nationalist movements, particularly when the grouping of political actors relies on an expansively lay understanding of the definition.

Körösenyi defines populism in three distinct ways: as an ideology-principle, as a process and connection, and as structural politics. In literature, populism is widely recognized as an ideology, which includes the following elements: a central antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite and an initiative to return power to the people as a homogeneous entity. Additionally, populism often involves declaring a crisis, placing the leader—who embodies the will of the people—in a central position, and engaging in adversarial politics, such as polarization strategies (Körösenyi, 2017). Aslanidis (2016) suggests abandoning the view of populism as strictly ideological and instead conceptualizing it primarily as a discursive frame. According to him, frame analysis discloses a strong fit between rhetorical elements and cognitive characteristics of populism, equipping solid methodological basis to canalize empirical research and supporting cooperation with neighboring fields branches of social science. Rather than viewing populism through a single lens, this study examines it using a hybrid analytical framework that takes into account both discursive and ideological aspects. This dual approach allows for a deeper understanding of how populist leaders deliberately construct foreign policy narratives to garner popular support and influence international relations. To go beyond simply restating existing concepts, this study integrates insights from political psychology, international relations, and the discursive method. It aims to make a unique contribution to the growing body of work on populist foreign policy rather than simply providing a descriptive summary. The central idea here is that the effects of populism are multifaceted, complex, and often multidimensional, making it impossible to fully understand how deeply it has affected contemporary world politics by focusing on just one conceptual component.

Macaulay (2019) proclaims analysis of populism is done through analysis of the narrative style or rhetoric of leaders in two cases. In one via response to the leader's populist discourse, and in the other the analysis of populist discourse through party election manifestos. These analyses shed light on certain basic concepts in populism such as "people", "heartland", "elite" and "charismatic leader" (p. 1, 2). Taggart (2002) describes the notion of "heartland" as a psychological object of populist attention; while also dividing between a detailed "people" and a section whose concern is the idealized "heartland". Taguieff (2005) offers a concise collection of characteristics for new populism, as opposed to Canovan (1982), who tries to define all forms of populism in a systematic manner. Laclau (2005) analyses populism not as a form of government, but as a "logic" that evolves as a result of the inability to solve big issues within society. For Laclau (2005), the "citizens" are more a construct of this logic than a predetermined



one (p. 15). While these perspectives provide valuable conceptual frameworks, they tend to concentrate on the internal dynamics of populist movements. In this study, however, populism is examined not only as an ideological or discursive phenomenon, but also through its performative function in foreign policy discourse, especially during election periods. By incorporating CDA and political psychology, this research aims to offer an interdisciplinary contribution that connects populist rhetoric with broader questions of identity, emotion, and international political behavior.

Bos et al. (2020) suggests in particular, populist communicators rely on persuasive strategies in which social group cues become more pronounced and influence people's judgment and political participation on political issues. This strategy is called the "populist identity framework" because ordinary people are seen as being threatened by various outside groups within the group (p. 3). Populist communicators engage in anti-elitist identity framing by blaming the political elite for social or economic problems that harm ordinary people. Another strategy is to blame immigrants for social problems, that is, the exclusionary identity framework. Finally, right-wing political actors tend to present ordinary people as a threatened ingroup, portraying them as victims of external threats or elites (p. 3). Finchelstein (2017) suggests that populism is based on imagining politics with a specific moralist perspective. Meaning that is the perception of the political world, ultimately in a fictional way, through a distinction between the morally pure and integrated people and the corrupt elites who are morally inferior. Criticism of the elite is a necessary condition for being a populist, but it is not sufficient. Otherwise, anyone criticizing the strengths and order in any country will be populist by definition. Populists are always anti-plural, as well as anti-eminent. They believe that they and only themselves represent the public (Boland, 2020, p. 3).

The mass or participatory focus of populist activity is of more direct interest to the public and generally involves the transfer of real political power to the average citizen than is the case for other forms of populism (Peters & Pierre, 2020). Thus, this typology of populism puts together two aspects of nationalist politics that are valuable for understanding how contemporary populist politics works. Firstly, it stresses that while populism is generally debated within political structures and is seen as democratic "backsliding", it is more common, and oppressive regimes can use nationalist mechanisms to legitimize the regime. The typology further highlights the distinction between populist policies that actually affect the electorate and those controlled by political insiders that use populist language with their own purposes.

Consequently, it emphasizes more than most populism discussions do the impact of populist politics on government (Peters & Pierre, 2020, p. 930).

Populist politics can reshape repertoires of political mobilization, particularly in the form of mass social movements and socially engaged party organizations (as cited in Gidron & Bonikowski, Madrid, 2006; Subramanian, 2007; Hawkins, 2010; Jansen, 2011). The potential of populist politics to stimulate new modes of civic interaction is increasingly important in an era of reduction in organized political activity, such as participation and party membership. Levitsky and Loxton (2012) claims that in unconsolidated democracies, populism can weaken democratic institutions and lead to competing authoritarian regimes. Pappas (2013) suggests that populism is closely connected to political fragmentation and can, under some circumstances, drive party regimes to the brink of failure. Additionally, populist politics have a constitutive role in political realignment, in which moral distinctions between classes are reshaped and categories of “us” and “them” appear (Laclau, 2018; Fella & Ruzza, 2013).

On the other hand, Finchelstein (2017) puts forward that populism is hostile to constitutionalism, values, and mechanisms (p. 140). Wide acceptance is that populists have a negative approach to the will of the majority, control and balance mechanisms, protection of minorities and even fundamental rights. Accordingly, populists want a direct and indirect relationship between the leader and the public. When they come to power, populists become less skeptical about constitutionalism as an obstacle to what they interpret as the will of the people. The popular will—which was never empirically given but built morally—must be determined by populists and embedded in the constitution (Walker, 2019). Populists want to immortalize the true image of the morally pure people and then build appropriate policies with their own understanding of the people (McKibben, 2023). As long as elections continue to be held in populist regimes, the opposition will have a chance to win, and pluralism will not be completely suppressed. If the opposition wins elections, these populist constitutions will lead to serious constitutional conflicts. Simply put, the basic promise of populism is that the people can rule. Populists say, at least theoretically, that the public not only possesses a common and consistent will, but also the public can go into administration as the execution of this will through the binding power of attorney given to the right representatives.

### 1.3. Finding a place to Populism in International Relations<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, populism as an ideology or a discourse in international relations has played a key role in policy-making processes of states. The notion leads policies either in the shape of discourse, as an ideology, or as a political strategy. As populists seize executive and legislative powers, the consequences of their rise become more important for international politics. While populist parties can influence foreign policy as junior partners in coalition governments or by shaping political discourse when in opposition, the election of populist leaders and the formation of populist governments will have a much more direct impact on the foreign policy of states and therefore on world politics. Populism carries in essence, anti-elite, pro-people, and general will frames, the populist leader uses these frames to legitimize the selection of roles to play internationally (Özyüksel, 2023). Certain viewpoints assert that populist governments pose a threat to multilateralism, free trade, and even the global liberal order itself (Müller 2017; Balfour et al. 2016). This might create unwanted effects on countries' places in the globalized world.

As a political tactic, an ideology, or a kind of language, populism directs policy (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Politics, in the eyes of populists, is fundamentally driven by a struggle between the “corrupt elite” and the “pure people” (Mudde, 2017). They oppose political plurality and see government as a common-sense application of common will (Canovan, 2002; Caramani, 2017; Blokker, 2019; Bartha et al. 2020). This rationale extends to foreign policy. In international politics, populist parties', and their leaders' views are sometimes imprecise and varied, not least since populism is typically associated with opposing political philosophies, from the far right to the far left.

The concept of populism exhibits a duality in its conceptualization, characterized either as a thin-centered ideology<sup>4</sup> (Mudde, 2004) or as a discourse (Laclau, 2005), embodying a mode of political identification that formulates and imparts significance to the “people” as an active political entity (Panizza, 2017). Consonant with this ideational framework, populism manifests as a discursive praxis, wherein communal identities materialize and concretize through the

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<sup>3</sup>This part of the study is mainly based on the author's earlier articles namely: Özyüksel, B. (2021). Populism In Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process. *Avrasya Sosyal ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(1), 146-160. & Özyüksel, B. (2023). Foreign policy decision-making processes in the frame of populism: Cases of Türkiye and Hungary. In *International Congress on Afro-Eurasian Research VII Proceedings* (pp. 53–75). Tirana.

<sup>4</sup> A “thin” ideology conception of populism, which attributes populist parties' electoral success to anti-elite and people-centric appeals that resonate with voters holding populist attitudes. (Neuner, F. G., & Wratil, C. (2022). The populist marketplace: Unpacking the role of “thin” and “thick” ideology. *Political Behavior*, 44(2), 551-574.)

utilization of binary dichotomies and confrontations, particularly evident in the contrasting notions of “corrupt elites” and the “pure people” (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016). The characterization of the “elites” extends beyond individuals with divergent priorities and values, exploring the realm of being morally “malevolent”. In international relations populist leaders undertake the task of not only challenging the public legitimacy and personal principles of these elites but also casting doubts upon their material interests (Müller, 2017, p. 82). Nevertheless, this created concept of enemies, the “elites”, is still highly dependent on the situation. There is a natural difficulty in defining the boundaries of these categories, as it is not always clear who is a “adversary” or a “friend” in different contexts. (Müller, 2017). The “elites”, forming a uniform and foundational antithesis to the populace, serve as a reflective counterpart to the very essence embodied by populist leaders, namely, the collective identity of the people themselves (Casullo, 2019, p. 57). The concept of people is a flexible construction for leader manipulation — it may allude to the people as sovereign, to identify the nation while excluding the elite, and/or to identify the ordinary people. Populist leaders’ confidence arises from the comprehension or an illusion that they understand what the people want and deserve is reflected in the general will (Mudde, 2004; Panizza, 2005).

While populism carries in essence, anti-elite, pro-people, and general will frames, the populist leader uses these frames to legitimize the selection of roles to play internationally. The role conceptions under populist leadership are informed by a thick ideology, such as neoliberalism or socialism, or a thin ideology, such as nationalism (Dzur & Hendriks, 2018; Stanley, 2008; Schroeder, 2020). Populism in this dissertation is dealt with mainly through the ideational prism in terms of a “thin-centered ideology” consisting of a triadic structure: the people, the elite, and the general will. The approach is not used dogmatically, though. Instead of confining populism to one meaning, this research applies the thin-centered ideology tool of analysis in examining how foreign policy discourse is built by populist leaders, especially in the contexts of elections. The use of this tool of analysis allows for the analysis of their rhetoric while not ignoring the complexities of populism both as political reasoning and a style of speech.

Populism, as expressed by Holliday (2020), encompasses a simultaneous reconfiguration of both domestic and international dimensions. In essence, populists engage in an ongoing process of redefining their interactions with their own citizenry as well as with antagonistic entities, both within local contexts and on a global scale. The assertion by populists to represent the untainted populace in opposition to a tainted elite and the prevailing establishment constitutes an assertion of ascendancy over a distinct socioeconomic stratum (Hisarlıoğlu, 2022, p. 6). This

populist paradigm delineates borders and designates affiliation both internally and externally (Zarakol, 2017, p. 7).

Populism is no longer a uniquely American or European phenomenon but has become a global political tactic. Politicians like India's Narendra Modi, Türkiye's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez successfully consolidated strong popular bases by deploying a combination of personal charisma, strategic use of the mass media, and rhetoric against the elites. It is important to note that not all politicians who criticize elites can be labeled populists. In the cases of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán, populism has influenced foreign policy alignments and domestic politics. The centralized and individualized foreign policy decision-making procedures of these nations contrast sharply with more institutional, non-populist political systems. Özyüksel (2023) argues that the foreign policy ambitions of populist regimes often reflect nationalist agendas and strategically use international forums to bolster domestic legitimacy.

Following the discussion on the definitions of populism and its relationship with international relations, the phenomenon needs to be integrated into international relations theories. Many classical international relations theories, such as classical realism, idealism, liberalism and nationalism, can include populism in their frameworks. However, since populism is inherently ambiguous, it requires a theoretical approach that can manage and embrace this uncertainty. In this context, as will be explained in detail in the following sections of this study, neorealism, constructivism and poststructuralism offer fertile ground and significant potential for adapting to contemporary populism in the global arena.

#### **1.4. Populism's Place among International Relations Theories**

##### **1.4.1. A Neorealist Perspective on Populist International Relations**

In the study of international relations, neorealism emphasizes the structural constraints of the anarchic international system and the primacy of state security and power. It is based on the assumption that states act as rational, unitary actors, driven by self-interest and survival (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). But the rise of right-wing populist leadership in recent decades has posed significant challenges to the neorealist model by disrupting traditional understandings of state behavior. Populist leaders, known for their nationalist language and "us" versus "them" rhetoric, have transformed the relationship between domestic politics and international relations by reinterpreting structural pressures through an ideological prism. The neorealist framework for understanding the foreign policies of populist leaders makes it

possible to analyze the systemic pressures that shape the policies of these leaders by focusing on the structures of the international system (Rose, 1998). However, the way populist leaders perceive and respond to the international system requires a more complex and multidimensional use of neorealism's analytical power.

Neorealism, or structural realism, as formulated by Waltz (1979), argues that the international system is defined by anarchy —the absence of an overarching authority— and that states are rational actors trying to ensure their survival in a competitive environment. Neorealism emphasizes two fundamental principles: the first is the distribution of power. Accordingly, the balance of power among states determines their relative security and position within the international system (Waltz, 1999). The second is the unitary state hypothesis. It assumes that states are treated as unitary actors and that domestic politics and ideological differences are considered secondary to systemic pressures (Waltz, 1999). Neorealism explains phenomena such as alliances, arms races, and conflicts through the logic of maximizing power and security (Mearsheimer, 2003). However, it tends to ignore the internal dynamics of states, including the role of ideology, leadership and political psychology, which can significantly influence foreign policy behavior (Keohane, 1986).

Populist leaders often use the anarchic nature of the international system and the balance of power dynamics to legitimize their political agenda (Hisarlioğlu et al., 2021). In this context, neorealist theory provides a basis for analyzing the concepts of “power struggle” and “sovereignty” that are often emphasized in the discourses and policies of populist leaders. When the cases of Erdoğan and Orbán are analyzed in terms of this theoretical framework, it is seen that both leaders display a critical attitude towards the existing structure of the international system and transform the systemic pressures of this structure into a foreign policy understanding that prioritizes national interests. These leaders can use psychological dynamics such as fear and group identification to ensure their power, for example, by portraying foreign actors as an existential threat to the country, they create powerful in-group and out-group dynamics that appeal to their domestic followers. Using psychologically agreeable nationalist language, they can strategically support measures that are compatible with their ideological goals and the structural constraints of the international system. Although neorealism's focus is on systemic forces (Krasner, 1995), by integrating concepts from political psychology a more comprehensive understanding of how populist leaders' emotional and cognitive responses to these pressures influence their foreign policy decisions can be examined. This combination

highlights the interplay between the international system and individual-level motivations that drive populist rule on the global stage.

While neorealism views systemic pressures as the primary drivers of state behavior (Wendt, 1994), populist leaders often reinterpret these pressures through a national ideological lens. This creates tension between the structural determinism of neorealism (Rathbun, 2008) and the agency of populist leadership. For example, Orbán frames the EU and immigration from Muslim countries as existential threats to Hungarian sovereignty and identity (Sata, 2023). While neorealism might predict that Hungary would align with stronger powers to maximize security, Orbán's rhetoric emphasizes resistance to EU norms and values, privileging national populist narratives over systemic calculations. As for Turkish case, Erdoğan's foreign policy reflects a mix of populism and neo-Ottomanism (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019; Nazmi, 2022), challenging Western alliances like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while engaging in aggressive regional strategies —e.g., in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğan's rhetoric often portrays the West as a hostile "them" seeking to undermine Türkiye's sovereignty, which shapes his conflictual stance (Göksel, 2019). These cases reveal how populist leaders reinterpret systemic pressures to align with their domestic political agendas, using foreign policy as a platform to reinforce their authority and ideological narratives.

Neorealists argue that ideas of national security and sovereignty often serve as the basis for the actions of populist leaders in foreign affairs (Taliaferro et al., 2009). Erdoğan emphasizes the goal of strengthening Türkiye's position as a regional power in the international system and aims to do so by exploiting power imbalances and systemic contingencies (Dal, 2016). Türkiye's growing influence in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean (Oğurlu, 2012; Şener, 2022; Şener, 2023) and Africa (Ali, 2011; Wheeler, 2011) can be read not only as a geopolitical strategy but also as part of a power struggle in the international system. Orbán, on the other hand, has defined Hungary that resists the pressures of the international system and framed the EU (Batory, 2016) in particular as a systemic threat. Orbán's discourses focus on the relationship between national sovereignty and systemic threats and reflect Hungary's efforts to maintain a balance of power against these threats.

Neorealism's ability to analyze populist leaders' responses to the anarchic nature of the international system (Powell, 1994; Wendt, 1992) is what makes it effective in understanding populist international relations. The case leaders challenge these demands for a reinterpretation of their position within the international system, while using it as a basis for prioritizing their national interests. The dynamics of the international system have been used by Erdoğan and

Orbán as a tool and a strategic opportunity to strengthen their populist discourse. In this context, neorealist theory provides a vital framework for understanding how both systemic forces and strategic choices made by populist leaders influence their foreign policy actions. Neorealist perspective can be usefully applied to populist international relations for understanding the structural dynamics of the international system and how these are reflected in the decision-making processes of populist leaders. As a result, when paired with a comprehensive theoretical approach, the neorealist paradigm might even offer a great analytical capacity for understanding the political psychology of populist international relations. The neorealist approach allows for a thorough analysis of how leaders like Erdoğan and Orbán navigate the international system's balance of power dynamics.

Populist foreign policy can be understood by breaking through the narrow confines of neorealism and by instead drawing together structural variables and political psychology. Populist foreign policymakers tend also to personalize decision-making and frequently interpret foreign pressure in emotive, rather than structural, terms. Political psychology can account for the role of emotion, whether in the form of pride or fear, as well as identity-based mobilization, in rallying popular enthusiasm. When paired with the international system's structural forces, this allows a more complete explanation of how foreign policymakers who are populist operate in relation to both domestic pressure and foreign constraints.

#### **1.4.2. Populist International Relations from a Constructivist Perspective**

The study of international relations has historically been dominated by ideas of liberalism and realism, although constructivism started to gain traction in the late 1980s. Writers of this era were well-prepared to take into account events around the end of the Cold War and questioned the materialism and individualism that supported realism theory (Kappenberg, 2019). Additional contributions were able to clarify the ways in which identity and norms influence state objectives, which helped to explain realism-related problems such military interventions and the change of great powers (Barnett, 2013). By emphasizing that states cannot be isolated from a framework of meaning that affects their identities and interests, constructivists challenge the individualistic ideas that constitute standard ontologies of the state and instead focus on a social ontology (Fierke, 2016, p. 166). Contrary to traditional theories that assume that governments pursue permanent values such as money and power, constructivists emphasize that the fundamental elements of international relations are created in accordance with their historical and social contexts. Furthermore, constructivists have provided greater insight into



the factors underlying state power by indicating that it includes ideational elements in addition to material capacities as emphasized by realism (Fierke, 2016).

Populist international relations has also a connection with constructivist perspectives on identity, norms, and social structure. This theory argues that populist leaders' actions in the international system are not only strategic but also normative and identity based (Kappenberg, 2019). In this context, constructivist analysis offers a promising framework for understanding how populism emerges in the international system and challenges its normative structure. This approach emphasizes how identities, norms, and values influence state behavior. Because populist discourse and policies are heavily bottomed on identity, otherness, and normative frameworks (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Wojczewski, 2019; Cetin, 2019), this theory is a useful tool for understanding the foreign policy steps of populist leaders. A constructivist perspective can be set as a ground under the distinction between "us" and "them" that populist politicians use in their discourse. This division impacts foreign policy opposition and domestic political polarization. On tangible elements such as power and economic interests, international relations are shaped by social structures and shared meanings (Checkel, 1998, pp. 325, 326) that can be understood using a constructivist perspective. Thus, constructivism can be used as a key theoretical tool in the study of populist international relations. Indeed, besides particular policies, populist leaders construct social meanings through national identity, moral frameworks, and divisions between "us" and "them".

According to constructivist theory, the international system is not only an anarchic structure; this structure is continuously constructed through social interactions and shared meanings of states (Ruggie, 1998). Constructivists argue that identity building is an intersubjective process in which people jointly create their own identities as well as ideational and normative frameworks (Hopf, 1998). In this context, populist international relations clearly reveal this process of social construction in the discourses and actions of leaders. The constructivist perspective on how ideational structures influence actors' assessments of the value of material resources demonstrates how populists use identity construction to portray circumstances as threats to the interests of their constituents (Kappenberg, 2019). As the main cases of this work, Türkiye and Hungary are two examples where this process is clearly seen. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán have attempted to create alternative normative frameworks and identities by questioning the norms and actors of the international system (Hisarlıoğlu et al., 2019). This process can be seen as an attempt to redefine the normative structure of the international community rather than adapting to it. Erdoğan has defined Türkiye as the

“defender of the oppressed”<sup>5</sup> and the “leader of the Muslim world”, while Orbán has positioned Hungary as the “last bastion of Christian Europe”.<sup>6</sup> These identities not only strengthen their domestic political support but also allow them to redefine their place in the international system. A constructivist framework provides a fundamental tool for understanding the dynamics of this process and for analyzing the role that populist leaders play in the social structure of the international system.

Populist leaders redefine their roles in the international system with the help of identity creation (Hisarlıoğlu et al., 2019). Erdoğan’s foreign policy largely involves building an identity based on the Ottoman past and gaining regional leadership through this identity (Görener & Ucal, 2011). At the same time, this new conception of identity, presented as a “vision of a new Türkiye”, can be added to the perspective of building a new nation (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Eroler, 2023). This is not only a geopolitical strategy, but also a constructed identity and set of meanings. A structural analysis helps to understand how this discourse questions international norms and legitimizes Erdoğan’s foreign policy actions. Similarly, Orbán’s anti-European rhetoric and his description of Hungary as the “last bastion of Christian Europe” also reflect an effort to create an identity at the national and international level. This discourse is used to challenge liberal norms and emphasize national sovereignty.

The way voters’ identities are constructed in contrast to the identities of perceived opponents is a central emphasis of a constructivist analysis of a populist leader’s stance on issues such as foreign powers or immigration. Moreover, this identity is constructed in ways that support interests that serve the demand for national identity preservation and security. Language is also important, because the leader evokes a sense of threat to national interests by using specific terms for the opposing identities of the political elite and refugees (Kappenberg, 2019). Consequently, the constructivist framework examines how populist leaders understand and try to rethink the normative order of the international system. Erdoğan’s and Orbán’s statements challenge established international conventions by creating alternative identities and frameworks. These strategies are based on the constructivist understanding that identities and norms are not fixed but constantly negotiated. The discourses of populist leaders show that

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<sup>5</sup> İletişim Başkanlığı. (2020, October 25). Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bugün Türkiye, dünyanın her yerindeki toplumların gönüllerinde, mazlumların hamisi, hakkın ve adaletin savunucusu olarak taht kurmuştur. İletişim Başkanlığı. <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-Erdoğan-bugun-turkiye-dunyanin-her-yerindeki-toplumların-gonullerinde-mazlumların-hamisi-hakkın-ve-adaletin-savunucusu-olarak-taht-kurmıştır>

<sup>6</sup> Telex. (2022, May 16). Orbán: “Hungary has become the last Christian-conservative bastion of the Western world”. Telex. <https://telex.hu/english/2022/05/16/Orbán-hungary-has-become-the-last-christian-conservative-bastion-of-the-western-world>

foreign policy actions are not only strategic but also meaning-based (Destradi et al., 2022; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). These reports allow leaders to redefine their position in the international system.

#### **1.4.3. Poststructuralism and Populist International Relations**

Poststructuralism is a critical approach that emphasizes the central role of discourse, meaning, and power relations in international relations theory (Dermawan, 2019). This theory treats the international system not as a fixed structure but as a process that is constantly reconstructed by discourses and power relations (Baumann, 2022). In this respect, poststructuralism offers a unique tool for understanding the actions and discourses of populist leaders in international relations. While populist international relations emphasizes this discursive construction process, poststructuralism offers a suitable theoretical framework for analyzing the functioning of this process. According to the poststructuralist approach, international order is an area dominated by certain systems of truth and rhetoric (Hansen, 2005). Populist leaders are actors who challenge these systems of truth and offer alternative discourses. In this context, populist international relations not only challenges existing international norms and rules but also tries to reconstruct the meaning of these norms and rules. The leadership of Erdoğan and Orbán provides concrete examples of this process. While Erdoğan created the narrative that the West follows “double standards” and is an “anti-Muslim” power<sup>7</sup> (Aydındağ, 2021), Orbán described the EU as “a threat to Hungarian sovereignty”<sup>8</sup> (Dieringer, et. el., 2024). These discourses question the existing normative order in the international system besides allowing populist leaders to redefine their national interests and identity against this order.

Poststructuralism offers a critical analysis of the meanings used by populist leaders in their language and the effects of these meanings on international relations. This analysis reveals that discourse is the instrument of power and shapes power relations in the international system (Holzscheiter, 2014; Stengel & Nabers, 2019). The discourses of Erdoğan and Orbán can be used not only to mobilize domestic political supporters, but also to redefine their positions in the international system. In this context, poststructuralism offers a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding how populist international relations transform power and knowledge relations.

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<sup>7</sup> İletişim Başkanlığı. (2023). *Stratcom Summit'23*.

[https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/dosyalar/Stratcom2023\\_EN.pdf](https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/dosyalar/Stratcom2023_EN.pdf) (p. 49)

<sup>8</sup> Babarczy, E. (2016, September 22). *Media's role in promoting nationalism*. PEN/Opp. <https://www.penopp.org/articles/medias-role-promoting-nationalism>

Populist international relations are closely related to poststructuralism's emphasis on discourse, power, and the regime of justice. An analytical framework that enables analyzing the connections among nationalism, populism, and foreign policy may be built by utilizing insights from poststructuralist theory. The populist idea of the people, like the state or nation, can be an ontological referent that is (re)constructed through foreign policy discourse, even though poststructuralist international relations has demonstrated how foreign policy discourse creates and reproduces the state by setting it apart from other international others (Wojczewski, 2020).

It is possible to examine how populist actors can utilize foreign policy as a space for the (re)production of their claims to represent the people since poststructuralist international relations views foreign policy as a practice of creating borders that divide the self from the other (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 414). A discursive approach to populism draws on Ernesto Laclau's theoretical framework and sees populism as a strategy that combines different social grievances into a collective identity of the "people" represented by a populist actor (Laclau, 2005). This identity is constructed against a common enemy, the "establishment", which is blamed for obstructing the fulfillment of these demands. In contrast to the thin-centered ideology perspective, the discursive approach focuses on the processes of constructing sociopolitical categories such as "the people" and distinguishes between populist and nationalist identity formations by examining practices of differentiation and othering. This framework intersects with poststructuralist international relations theory, which interprets foreign policy as a practice of drawing boundaries (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 414).

The poststructuralist approach offers a relational understanding of identities, showing that identities are inherently unstable and incomplete, but can be constructed and implemented against another's difference (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 415). States do not have an internal nature outside of these processes and are instead continually modified by different activities (Campbell, 1998, p. 12). By drawing distinctions between "inside" and "outside" or "self" and "other", foreign policy plays a key role in this identity-making process and makes the state possible (Campbell, 1998, pp. 9, 12). This procedure also emphasizes that a state or country has no objective essence because language creates its meanings (Nabers, 2009, p. 192). Additionally, foreign policies both rely on and reproduce representations of identity (Hansen, 2006, p. 1). In this hierarchical construction, the state is framed as a secure and ordered space in contrast to the "foreign" or "international", characterized by anarchy and insecurity (Ashley, 1987).

Without simplifying the idea of identity and legitimizing populist-nationalist demands, the poststructuralist approach can explain the importance of identity in right-wing populist politics and its relationship with foreign policy by emphasizing the relational perspective of identity (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 415). A poststructuralist perspective offers a critical framework for examining the meaning and effects of these discourses. Discourse is not only a means of communication, but also a means of power. Erdoğan's and Orbán's discourses are, on the one hand, a tool for communicating with their supporters at the national level, and on the other hand, for redefining their relations with other players in the international system. Poststructuralism makes it possible to understand the power relations behind these discourses and how these relations are reproduced (Baumann, 2022; Skøld, 2019). The discourse of populist leaders creates a justice system that questions power relations and normative order in the international system (Farias et al., 2024; Etzioni, 2018). This regime not only consolidates the power of populist leaders but also reshapes the legitimacy of the international system. Poststructuralist analysis critically examines the meanings inherent in the discourses of populist leaders and explores how these leaders see and attempt to change the international system. The examples of Erdoğan and Orbán represent two important cases in which this analysis can be concretely applied. Through the discourses of both leaders, they redefined their country in the international system, and in the process created new meanings that questioned international norms.

## **CHAPTER 2. POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF POPULIST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Political psychology of populist international relations can be comprehended through the examination of the role of values, beliefs, and feelings of belonging as well as the leaders' personality trait and their decision-making processes especially in their countries' foreign policies. Foreign policy and domestic policy have become areas that cannot be separated from each other. The rationale and purpose of studying political psychology of populist international relations in this particular study through the selected populist leaders' discourses during specific elections times in the frame of foreign policy making is that international relations are narrowed down to the steps and decisions taken by states in their foreign policies. Multinational companies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, which have become parts of the international system with globalization, are also structures created because of states deciding to establish alliances and collaborations as foreign policy steps. In other words, today's international relations are a network of relations that should not be considered separately from the steps taken by states and their decision-makers in foreign policy-making processes. States, decision makers, and leaders in particular in Türkiye and Hungary, which are the subject of this work, shape the foreign policy steps they take and the discourses they construct as a strategy to gain domestic support within the framework of populist ideology. While doing this, they draw a Manichean impression by approaching populism with an ideological rationale and using the distinction between "us" and "them". Thus, by shaping the discourses around "them", "the other", "foreign/external powers" populist leaders use in foreign policy, create the image of heroes who can use the fears and concerns of the citizens and ward off these fears, and convey the rally around the flag message, which is one of the clear discourses of right-wing populism.

The study of international relations and foreign policy has been historically drawn from a wide array of disciplines outside of political science (Wright, 1955 as cited in Holsti, 1989). Primary divisions in this field revolve around two main approaches. The first approach concentrates on the structure of the international system, often drawing from economics to developing models, analogies, insights, and metaphors. This approach places a strong emphasis on rational preferences and strategic considerations, and how they are influenced and constrained by the structure of the international system. In the second approach, decision-making analysts are more concerned with understanding domestic political processes and tend to draw insights from

psychology and social psychology to gain a better understanding of the limitations and obstacles that influence information processing and decision-making processes (Holsti, 1989, p. 495). It is true that both approaches are essential, and relying on either one is insufficient. Ignoring the influence of the international system's structure and constraints can lead to analyses that portray policymakers as highly autonomous decision-makers with an almost unlimited range of choices, restricted solely by their ambitions and available resources. However, structural approaches also have their limitations in several crucial aspects, in that they cannot fully elucidate the nature and origins of interests and preferences, as these are typically influenced by factors beyond the system's structure alone. Ideology, beliefs about international affairs, perceptions of adversaries, and domestic factors often play equally significant roles. Consequently, structural models may not provide a comprehensive understanding of how interests and preferences evolve over time (p. 496).

Psychological research has made significant contributions to the field of international relations, particularly in areas like deterrence and foreign policy decision-making (Larson, 1985; Jervis et al., 1985; Levy, 2013; Stein, 2017). Over the past decades, there has been a notable increase in interest in psychology within international relations, even among those traditionally less inclined to incorporate psychological perspectives. Psychology is less likely in international relations to be presented as an initial assumption than it was twenty or thirty years ago, when it was defined solely against a rationalist baseline. Similar to how many criticisms of rational choice are more often directed at specific modeling assumptions than at the central idea of actors behaving according to a particular set of beliefs while facing a certain set of constraints (Snidal, 2002). Many criticisms of political psychology are directed at distinct psychological theories or empirical approaches; psychology, like rational choice, is not sufficiently homogeneous to be proven false in its entirety (Kertzer & Tingley, 2018, p. 4).

Political psychology that predominated in international relations historically concentrated on elites rather than the masses (Kinder, 1998), in sharp contrast to psychological work that primarily examined the political behavior of the public rather than political elites (Jervis et al., 1985; Herrmann, 1985). Psychological research in international relations has a fair amount of emphasis on public opinion research (Rosati & Miller, 2018). Political scientists initially settled on general foreign policy orientations as the causes of specific foreign policy attitudes because they believed that partisanship talked much less about foreign policy attitudes than domestic counterparts (Kertzer & Tingley, 2018, p. 9). Psychological techniques in international relations are becoming more and more focused on emotions. This is evident in studies of ethnic conflict

(Petersen, 2002), nuclear proliferation choices (Hymans, 2006), bargaining and diplomacy in general (Hall, 2015; Renshon et al., 2017).

The broad theories of international relations, including constructivism, liberalism, realism, and post-structuralist theory have formed the discipline's identity since the 1980s. A causally meaningful agency level of psychological components may not only be complimentary but also necessary to account for the significance of the structural factors to the degree that such theories are not dedicated to methodological holism (Pursiainen & Forsberg, 2021). The literature is not able to explain some parts of any choice without comprehending the psychological dimension of the primary decision-maker(s), particularly the idea that beliefs, cognitive biases, personality, and interpersonal interactions may play a role (Pursiainen & Forsberg, 2021). Although this is hardly a groundbreaking finding, it does highlight the issue of when and how psychology matters.

As for the populist international relations' political psychology, the term populism is frequently used to describe an aggressive communication style and straightforward policy recommendations that stem from strong emotions and radical viewpoints, typically held by those on the right of the political spectrum (Nai, 2021; Ekström et al., 2018). Despite the frequent reports that populist leaders have a "rougher" communication style (Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019), populism is more than just of that. Another variation or important development in the scope of research on populism has been greatly expanded by examining the international, transnational, and global aspects of the phenomenon. Previously, scholars focused primarily on the domestic arena, with special attention paid to voter mobilization (Jansen, 2011; Roberts, 2017), the populist content of political communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), and the political and discursive significance of populist leaders (Hawkins, 2009; Weyland, 2001). Contrarily, comparative viewpoints tended to ignore broader global interactions, foreign policy, or the field of international security in favor of concentrating on populist movements and political party systems (de la Torre, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012).

The increasing body of research on populism in international relations has highlighted the ways in which populist leaders and parties use populism to form their foreign policy decision-making processes (Jenne, 2021; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Wehner & Thies, 2020; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020) as well as the ways in which populist performances, rhetoric, and beliefs interact with populist discourses and practices. In this context, social constructions of hostility, existential threat, and crisis, along with discursive processes of external and internal othering (Wojczewski, 2020) are particularly noteworthy. Moreover, the populist securitization of



immigration and trade policy issues (Fermor & Holland, 2020) plays a significant role, while securitization also shapes populism's aesthetics, rhetoric, and performative style (Kurylo, 2022). Finally, the mobilization of ontological (in)security narratives against so-called “enemies of the people” (Steele & Homolar, 2019) further highlights the intersection of populism and securitization. The security imaginaries of populist discourses such as “Hungary First”<sup>9</sup>, “Stop Brussels”<sup>10</sup>, and “The world is bigger than five (in Turkish *dünya beşten büyüktür*)” (Aral, 2019) are based on socio-economic threat, political alienation, and socio-cultural anxiety. These discourses are distinctly non-elitist and represent the common concerns and fears of the “real people” (Beeman, 2018; Freeden, 2017). Populist performances and discourses emphasize dramatization, personalization, emotionalization, and conflict in their antagonistic framing of policy issues and representation of international politics. They also identify establishment failure and link the existence of a corrupt elite to broader socio-economic and socio-cultural anxieties and insecurities (Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015).

In order to legitimize themselves both domestically and abroad, Wajner (2021) contends that modern current populist administrations are becoming more and more eager to export the discursive construction of an adversarial connection between the “people” and the “elites” to regional and international arenas. Kinnvall and Svensson (2022), drawing on insights from political psychology, identify the conceptual interplay between internal and external insecurities as a defining characteristic of nationalist populist actors. Their primary focus is on the psychological and affective mechanisms that underline this process, viewing populism primarily as a source of anxiety that is expressed both in everyday and transnational contexts. In particular, their research of the fantasy narratives, emotional governance, and ontological insecurity of far-right populism focuses on gendered and racialized narratives and how they are fueled by emotions of vulnerability, pride, shame, and insecurity (Löfflmann, 2022, p. 411).

Although the inclusion of decision-making in international relations is a welcome development in addressing the problem of agent-structure, the agent is still under-theorized, and decades of research on the political psychology of foreign policy readily challenges some of the theory's tenets. An approach, or frame of reference, can be obtained from a political psychological

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<sup>9</sup> About Hungary (2018, June 4). PM Orbán: European parliamentary election will be about a struggle for values and cultures. <https://abouthungary.hu/prime-minister/pm-orban-european-parliamentary-election-will-be-about-a-struggle-for-values-and-cultures>

<sup>10</sup> “stop Brussels”: European Commission responds to Hungarian National Consultation. European Commission. (2017, April 27). [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation_en)

standpoint, as Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin suggested back in 1954. An agent-based, psychologically oriented approach provides a unique angle from which to view the world and international interactions. This viewpoint prioritizes decision-makers and leaders' subjective perceptions as filters for additional local and global opportunities and limitations. A multitude of elements, including psychological, sociological, ideational, political, institutional, and material ones, influence how decision makers understand and react to their local and foreign settings. Thus, via this psychological experience of agents, a psychological approach provides integration of many international relations theories and their theoretical shifts.

### **2.1. Role of Emotions, Values, Beliefs, and Identities in Shaping the Populist International System**

The role of emotions is apparent and widespread in global politics, with its implications particularly noticeable in the realm of transnational communications (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014). Fear and hatred are not the sole emotions with significant roles in global politics; empathy and compassion, for example, can wield equal influence (Ross, 2019). Yet, in populist politics, mainly the former are used in leaders' discourses. Despite being integral to various facets of global politics, the significance of emotions has been overlooked in the field of international relations scholarship. For instance, fear holds a crucial position in realist theories of security dilemmas, yet few authors explicitly acknowledge or systematically examine this emotion (Lanzillo, 2009). An exception lies in the longstanding tradition of studying thoroughly the psychological aspects of foreign policy. However, even in this context, emotions have not been fully recognized, primarily viewed as departures from rationality and factors that might account for misperceptions (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2007).

The significance of emotions in the field of international relations research is growing steadily (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014). Over the last ten years, the study of emotions in global politics has experienced a significant shift originally initiated as a critique of the longstanding division between emotion and reason, an increasing number of scholars in international relations now view emotions as inherent to the social sphere and, consequently, integral to world politics (Sasley, 2011; Arrifin et al., 2016). This shift has encouraged researchers to study emotions to gain new insights into both traditional and unexpected political events. The term "emotional turn" is now often used to describe this shift in focus. Emotions play an important role at multiple levels of analysis, prompting researchers to study them from a variety of perspectives, from how the brain responds to stimuli to how collective fear develops over time (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Bourke, 2003; Huddy, 2004).

While early political psychology studies opened new understandings of emotion, they also had limitations. Much of this work, especially those focused on psychology and deterrence, was still informed by the rational actor model. Emotions were often viewed as impediments to rational thought, leading to misperceptions that could interfere with sound political judgment (Jervis, 1976). This approach kept emotion and cognition separate concepts; a distinction that still dominates much of today's international relations research.

Fear is perhaps the most crucial emotion for interpreting international politics. It has most frequently been interpreted as a central emotion behind the traditional security dilemma, a feature of international politics widely regarded as characteristic of international relations (Booth & Wheeler, 2008). Surprisingly, this affective interpretation differs from structural realist perspectives, contending that security dilemmas are caused by the structure of the international system rather than needing to be motivated by emotions or behaviors (Crawford, 2000). Still, fear has long dominated the analysis of international politics. In addition to traditional security issues, fear also plays a central role in foreign policy populism. As a central part of political psychology, fear serves to mobilize popular support and thrust voters toward populists by increasing a sense of insecurity and sense of urgency (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Anger, on the other hand, along with related feelings like shame and hatred maybe as a result of fear, is sometimes seen as the primary factor that contributes to the disastrous choice, for instance, to start a war or conduct a military intervention (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008). International relations theories have some nuances in political psychological studies; constructivism and political psychology share some similarities in certain ways. To study the unique effects of discrete emotions like anger and anxiety, both are increasingly moving beyond general levels of emotional arousal or positive and negative valence (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Halperin et al. 2011; Kertzer & McGraw, 2012; Zeitzoff, 2014; Hutchison, 2016). They are also starting to connect with the issue of how emotions are frequently manipulated by strategic elites (McDoom, 2012).

Populism undeniably originates from feelings of anger and discontent, and it is essential not to overlook the identified potential sources of anger as catalysts for populist sentiments and movements (Marcus, 2021). Research has demonstrated how emotions such as fear, anger, danger, and collective resentment may mobilize voters to support a populist movement (Forgas & Crano, 2021). At the same time, populist discourse serves a positive purpose by offering communities a positive alternative to the status quo that they perceive as unjust or harmful. By offering cognitive simplicity, a clear moral distinction between good and evil, a strong sense of

group identity, and the possibility of collective renewal or salvation, populist ideologies often appeal to psychological needs (Chirumbolo et al., 2004; Kruglanski et al., 2021; van Prooijen, 2021). Rather than presenting rational or realistic explanations, leaders such as Putin, Orbán, Erdoğan or Kaczyński, label their opponents as enemies of the people or as evils. The tribal antagonism that populists exploit is deeply connected to fundamental human needs and values, especially the universal desire to identify with meaningful and positive social groups or collectives (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000; Hogg & Gøetsche-Astrup, 2021). There is considerable evidence that those who have a well-articulated feeling of relative hardship, grievance, and anger favor populist politics more (Fukuyama, 2018). Thus, unpleasant economic, social, and cultural conditions stimulate the potential for populism, but populism does not always emerge in reaction to such societal stresses.

Earlier study has concentrated on the structural factors that underline the perception of threat and injustice, such as economic anxiety or cultural backlash (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Specific national and personal circumstances play a role in determining who perceives this threat (Rooduijn, 2018) also influence the discursive opportunities available (Aalberg et al., 2017), thereby shaping the substantive focus of populist messages in different contexts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Van Kessel, 2015). Within these contexts, it has been demonstrated that individuals with stronger populist attitudes are more drawn to populist parties and the leaders (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2018; Oliver & Rahn, 2016), even when their policy preferences do not entirely align with those of a populist party (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Significantly, voters who feel more vulnerable are more likely to support populism (Rico et al. 2017; Spruyt et al. 2016). In fact, as argued by Spruyt et al. (2016, p. 344), this is the juncture where psychological coping mechanisms among voters and the politicization of social conditions by parties come together.

The foundational explanation relies on Kurt Lewin's seminal theory, which posits that human behavior is shaped by the perceived environment, encompassing both physical and social factors, along with individual tendencies such as ideas, thoughts, intentions, and fantasies (Kump, 2023). According to Lewin, the critical aspect in social life is not the objective reality but how it is perceived and interpreted by individuals. Notably, Lewin extended this theory to group dynamics, asserting that the behavior of both individuals and groups is significantly influenced by their collective perception of the situation and group characteristics (Lewin, 1948). Another key element of Lewin's theory is the proposal that a tension state arises within

the human system when there is a psychological need or intention, and this tension is reduced when the need or intention is fulfilled (Kump, 2023).

A common populist narrative often involves stirring up public sentiment by asserting that the elites have betrayed the people (Rooduijn, 2015). In any governmental system, including monarchy, there is an expectation that the leadership should dutifully guide its “crowd”, ensuring protection and meeting its needs, hence creating a sense of identity. Failure to fulfill this sacred mission is viewed as a breach of trust by the government and serves as grounds for its removal and replacement, whether through peaceful means or otherwise (Fournier, 2019). The universal structure of populist narratives, evident in various versions across cultures and historical periods, can be characterized by two key features (Yanchenko, 2021, p. 9): (1) they are straightforward and comprehensible, contributing to a sense of certainty, and (2) they provide a sense of empowerment, promising a path to significance and dignity. These narratives commonly adopt a Manichean nature, depicting virtuous common people oppressed by a malevolent elite and advocating for political actions aimed at toppling the elite and assuming control of societal affairs.

According to the populist perspective, the masses have experienced oppression at the hands of the elite and the institutions established by them. Populist discourse frequently incorporates a moral dimension (Alschuler & Metze, 2020). Müller (2017) suggests that populists merge anti-elitism with the belief that they possess a morally superior understanding of what constitutes a genuine citizen of their nation. The conceptualization of the moral aspect might vary based on left and right political orientations. In the case of progressive populists, the moral dimension could revolve around achieving justice and equality for all individuals (Zabala, 2017), while for far-right populism, the moral component may focus on the economic and social upliftment of the ingroup. Right-wing populism often taps into a sense of relative deprivation, whether it be in comparison to other societal groups (Marchlewska et al., 2018) or in relation to one’s own expectations or aspirations—namely, the anticipated wealth or status individuals believed they should have achieved by a particular point in their lives (Pettigrew, 2017). In the context of far-right populism, there is a perceived significant threat that is seen as depriving the masses of what they rightfully deserve.

In this dissertation, it is shown that Erdoğan and Orbán use their discourses placing populism as an ideology to trigger their countries’ citizens’ feelings of identity, fear, and anger. The people whose fundamental beliefs have been threatened by the so-called external powers, or the archenemies, are inclined to vote for the populist leaders who present themselves as the nation’s

saviors. As the populist leaders provide a sense of comfort to their citizens, they also covertly threaten the pure people with their sense of nationalism unless they vote for them. In this study, CDA of the speeches of case leaders helps reveal the political-psychological aspects of populist international relations.

## **2.2. Role of Leaders in Shaping International System**

Foreign policy, particularly diplomacy, is an arena dominated by an exceptionally exclusive and elite community, consisting of unelected foreign policy bureaucrats, politicians (often secondary tier), and scholars from think tanks (Naumescu & Petruț, 2022). From the populist perspective, the global outlook championed by such elites symbolizes the disconnect between the people and their government (Nadesan & Ron, 2020). Numerous foreign policy issues are not only beyond the scope of ordinary citizens' concerns (Cornago, 2010), but the complicated diplomatic protocols and etiquette further contribute to the perception of foreign affairs being detached from the "true people" (Bátora, 2010). Therefore, it can be predicted that populist leaders will try to reduce the influence of foreign policy actors, especially career diplomats, whom they associate with elitism and globalization. According to research, excessive centralization of authority is a typical feature of populist regimes (Cuhadar et al., 2017; Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). This situation is clearly seen in the example of Türkiye. This concentration of power often results in the weakening of established institutions such as foreign ministries, as foreign policy choices are increasingly concentrated in the hands of the populist leader and a small group of trusted advisors (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). One of the notable trends in recent global politics has been the ascent of populist leaders to power across various regions (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). As populists assume control of executive and legislative branches, the implications of their rise gain increased significance in international politics. While populist parties may influence foreign policy as junior partners in coalition governments or by shaping political discourse in opposition, the election of populist leaders and the establishment of populist governments will have a more direct impact on the foreign policies of states, consequently influencing global politics (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015).

International relations researchers have shown a growing interest in the study of leaders since studies have started to show that individual leaders matter in international politics (Byman & Pollack, 2001; Jervis, 2013; Yarhi-Milo, 2014). A previous tradition in international relations psychology examined leaders ideographically, focusing mostly on operational codes, cognitive maps, and psychological profiles of specific leaders (Kertzer & Tingley, 2018). While some work in this tradition is still being done (Hermann et al. 2001; Schafer & Walker 2006; Dyson,

2006; Renshon, 2008), most recent research on leaders in international relations is less explicitly psychological and more nomothetic, concentrating on the general importance of leaders in international relations (Saunders, 2011; Weeks 2014; Horowitz et al., 2015) rather than cognitive attributes. There are times when the two waves of work debate one another due to their different methods. In contrast to the former tradition the latter frequently examines leaders situationally. This is because leaders may encounter distinct incentive structures because of varying institutional environments (McGillivray & Smith, 2008), or they may have unique political or military experiences that influence their conduct (Horowitz & Stam, 2014; Fuhrmann & Horowitz, 2015). Further interaction between the two literary subjects would be useful in examining the relationship between temperamental traits and situational interests (Kertzer, 2016).

As a contribution to the analysis of leaders' role in international relations literature, Cuhadar et al. (2017) examine how Turkish leaders' personality profiles alter as they take on various institutional roles with various sets of limitations using machine-coded content analysis. Accordingly, despite contextual shifts, leaders' attributes remain mostly constant. In a similar vein, it is remarkable how little the psychology of international relations has done to reconcile the study of elite political conduct with that of popular political behavior. While studies of personality in mass political behavior are built around commonly used frameworks from personality psychology, such as the Big 5<sup>11</sup> (e.g., Gerber et al., 2010), political psychologists studying elite behavior tend to use other frameworks e.g., leadership style (Keller & Yang 2008), perhaps stemming from the assumption that the key explanatory frameworks for foreign policy decision-making should be specific to foreign policy itself (Gallagher & Allen 2014).

The foreign policy direction of leaders' nations on the other hand is not entirely altered by populists in power. Conversely, populists tend to support established patterns in international affairs, often more drastically or severe than their non-populist predecessors (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, p. 728). Furthermore, a characteristic aspect of populists in positions of power is their ongoing mobilization of support base. Once in government, as they themselves become the often-criticized elite, populists must find new ways to maintain an anti-elitist stance (Müller, 2017, p. 41). This might involve presenting themselves as victims (of the media, judiciary, or other domestic institutions) or attributing any failures to elites working behind the

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<sup>11</sup> The five broad personality traits described by the theory are extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (D. W. Fiske, 1949; later developed by Norman (1967), Smith (1967), Goldberg (1981), and McCrae & Costa (1987)).

scenes, whether domestically or internationally. Additionally, the assertion of being the authentic representatives of the people requires continual performative validation. Populists are consistently on the campaign trail, continuously engaging in polarization. Consequently, under populist administrations, the politicization of specific international issues for domestic mobilization (such as rallying around the flag) can be expected to be especially intense (Destradi et al., 2022).

Populists might not universally embrace a more aggressive foreign policy. Instead, their utilization of foreign policy for domestic mobilization is likely to embody a blend of their populist “thin ideology” (marked by anti-elitism and anti-pluralism) with their underlying “thick ideology”<sup>12</sup> (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, p. 729). Depending on this thick ideology, populists may exclude specific segments of the population from their definition of the true people, such as migrants or members of certain minorities. In such instances, it can be anticipated that populists in power will direct their attention to foreign countries closely associated with the excluded sections of their population, primarily for domestic mobilization purposes. The particular thick ideology of populists can either amplify or alleviate their skepticism toward global governance in certain policies. For instance, right-wing populists may demonstrate a greater willingness to compromise on trade liberalization compared to those advocating a leftist thick ideology (Jones, 2021). Populists might also be more inclined to support the people abroad against entities hostile to them, potentially interfering with the internal affairs of countries hosting diasporas. For instance, Orbán’s policy towards the Hungarian citizens abroad (Stockmans, 2023) and Erdoğan’s interest in Turkish citizens especially in Germany (Söylemez, 2021) supports their populist politics and take place in discourses during election times.

An emerging theme in the literature on the international aspects of populism highlights how populism arises as a response to global developments, including the growing authority and politicization of international organizations. The domestic anti-elitism inherent in populism is likely to align with a disregard for transnational elites and international institutions perceived as detached from the real people (Metawe, 2024). Populist leaders are expected to view international institutions as constraints on their government’s maneuvering or as threats to their country’s cherished national sovereignty; Hungary and Türkiye’s fundamental skepticism to the

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<sup>12</sup> Attributes the success of populist parties to particular “thick” or “host” ideologies, such as anti-immigration, anti-globalization, or pro-redistribution positions. (Neuner, F. G., & Wratil, C. (2022). The populist marketplace: Unpacking the role of “thin” and “thick” ideology. *Political Behavior*, 44(2), 551-574.)



EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF)<sup>13</sup> can summarize this viewpoint. Consequently, when populists come to power, it is foreseen that they might sideline such institutions, akin to how they treat intermediate institutions domestically (Metawe, 2024).

The anti-pluralist aspect of populism asserts that only the populist leader, and no one else, can represent the true people (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Hence, when populists assume government positions, bureaucracy may remain intact. The pathway to the populist leader's decision-making likely involves less standardized communication channels and more reliance on personal or familial connections, or party affiliations. Populist leaders are expected to collaborate with small groups of advisors, likely not drawn from traditional foreign policy elites (Hisarlıoğlu et al., 2022). Simultaneously, these leaders may place greater trust in their personal relationships with other world leaders rather than relying on more formalized methods of bilateral communication, such as ambassadors or contacts with line ministries (Hisarlıoğlu et al., 2022, p. 5).

Instead of engaging in political competition with recognized opposition, populist leaders assert that they are battling shadowy adversaries, both domestically and internationally (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). This approach is, in part, a response to the dilemma that holding office and becoming the new governing elite could compromise their fundamental anti-establishment narrative. To navigate this contradiction, populists in power frequently criticize individuals from the previous elite, such as Erdoğan's criticism towards the Kemalist<sup>14</sup> elites before him and his party coming to power in 2002 and onwards, claiming they are still exerting influence behind the scenes. This accusation is then used as a justification for purging the civil service. Populist leaders resonate with a portion of the population disenchanted by mainstream politics and policies. Political sociologists and scholars have previously observed that populist leaders employ discursive tactics that are atypical within the public sphere (Duina, 2022). These observers highlight that populists make use of simplistic moral arguments pitting good against evil, heavily rely on emotional appeals (both negative and positive), be cautious rationality, and frequently employ vague and sentimental language in their rhetoric and commitments. They may publicly display emotions, violate diplomatic norms, and take unexpected actions without consulting even their most trusted advisors and allies (Duina, 2022). It is indeed accurate to

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<sup>13</sup> *Budapest to symbolically shut down IMF Office*. Euractiv. (2013, July 16).

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/budapest-to-symbolically-shut-down-imf-office/>

<sup>14</sup> The entirety of the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first President of the Republic of Türkiye, regarding the political, social and economic shaping of the new state established after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is called "Kemalism". (Alpbaz, M. M. (2019). Kemalist otoriterlik, anayasa yargısı ve askeri mahkemeler. *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 74(3), 895-929.)

assert that these behaviors diverge from the conventional practices associated with the public sphere. All of these behaviors have a common underlying factor: they are characteristic of how it is typically operated in the private sphere. Hence, when exhibited by political leaders in a public and visible manner, they directly challenge the fundamental principles of the public sphere. Although populists may use a variety of approaches (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022), “speaking like the people” is a common goal of populist discourse (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

The rhetoric of populist politicians is complemented by their mannerisms. It follows the same reasoning. Ordinary politicians behave in public in a calm, premeditated manner that is unaffected by their characteristics or personal preferences (Duina, 2022). Their remarks are carefully chosen and preferably reflective of a pre-established procedure and formula, regardless of whether they are speaking to an ordinary person or the prime minister of another nation. The public is often reached by leaders through established, closely watched channels of communication. An explanation for populist leaders’ success must explain not just why millions of their supporters endorse them but also why they frequently do so intensely and viscerally. Populist leaders inspire strong, innate, and frequently unwavering loyalty. Those leaders inspire, acknowledge, and even personify their people (Duina, 2022). In sum, populist leaders can mobilize and persuade their supporters with their bold, passionate, and energetic political style because they can build a direct and effective relationship with them (Canovan, 1999; Weyland, 2001). Politicians may overcome gaps between their messages and reality with the use of charisma, which is especially helpful in demagogic communication (Barr, 2009, p. 32).

### **2.3. The Implications of Political Psychology for the Study of Populism**

Political psychology ensures understanding the mechanisms underlying populism, particularly how populist leaders play on emotions, cognitive biases, and social identity dynamics. Populism’s slogan “us-them” narratives that create a dichotomy between “pure people” and “corrupt elites” and this dichotomy is often consolidated by crisis framing and fear-based propaganda, as will be explained thoroughly in the case study chapter in this dissertation. Cognitive biases like availability and confirmation help perpetuate populist views as people selectively analyze information that supports their worldview. When leaders frame political and social issues in ways that provoke existential anxiety, emotions like fear, anger, and nostalgia are key to mobilizing popular support (Aytaç et al., 2024). Populist leaders’ discourses often arouse a sense of ontological insecurity in their followers while also creating a sense of security and belonging (Bartoszewicz, 2021). Moreover, political psychology explains populist leaders’

high levels of control and narcissism, which are the two personality traits that enable them to appeal to and retain loyal followers. By combining psychological perspectives, a deeper understanding can be gained of why populism is so strong in different political contexts and countries and how it affects both domestic and foreign relations.

Populism has influenced foreign policy, government strategies, and electoral dynamics in a variety of political contexts. Although much of the research on the topic has focused on its institutional effects (Roberts, 2022), structural foundations, and ideological side (Aslanidis, 2016), a psychological approach is needed to understand the appeal, purpose, and consequences of populism. Political psychology, a specialized field that studies how identity, emotions, personality traits, and cognitive processes influence political behavior, can and should be used to study populism.

The notion that political systems are fundamentally shaped by human nature and reflect human psychology can be traced back to antiquity, as Plato originally proposed in his seminal work, the Republic (Fleming, 1988). This foundational idea was reiterated by John Stuart Mill through his renowned assertion that “all phenomena of society are also phenomena of human nature” (Little, 2009; Mill, 1988 [1947]). In political science, populism was traditionally viewed as a supply-side phenomenon that centered on political leaders. While this presents some opportunities for political psychology, the field is no stranger for analyzing political leaders. Political psychology has the most promise when it comes to the ideational method, which naturally extends to supply-side (politician) and demand-side (public) examinations of the phenomena (Kaltwasser, 2021). Recent studies (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2018; Rooduijn, 2018) have focused more on the demand side of populism, and political psychology is gradually beginning to examine the populist phenomena. Although populism is a difficult term to quantify, the area that has made significant contributions to the knowledge of authoritarianism, nationalism, nativism, and radical-right.

By political psychology standards, populism is a complicated and contentious term. Most empirical researchers are beginning to agree on the ideational definition, however there are still disagreements about what it truly is (Erisen et al., 2021). According to the ideational definition, populism is an ideology or discourse frame that stems from the conflict between the pure, homogenous people and the cunning elites who plot to exploit them (Mudde, 2017). Following this ideational definition populism offers unprecedented opportunities to assess the phenomenon attitudinally and to understand the psychological precedence and individual differences underlying it (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018). Populism adopts a normative position

that views politics as the exclusive manifestation of the will of the people. Although not exhaustive, populism is often viewed as a political tactic focused on rationalist vote maximization (Weyland, 2017) or a style focused on the “tell-it-like-it-is” presentation of political discourse (Moffitt, 2016).

Particular attention has been paid to the function of personality traits in empirical research, which has found a connection between voting for populist parties and poor agreeableness (Bakker et al., 2016). Instead, a different line of empirical research has concentrated on the significance of uncertainty avoidance in relation to voting for radical-right populist parties (Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020). A few studies have also examined the relationship between the populist political perspective and emotions, particularly rage (Marcus, 2021; Rico et al., 2017). Furthermore, researchers in the field of populism have utilized insights from psychology to create metrics for assessing populist attitudes and their foundational elements (Erisen et al., 2021). They have also formulated operational definitions, contending that the concept of populism is more impactful when considered as a cohesive entity rather than merely the sum of its individual components (Wuttke et al., 2020). Integrating political psychology into populism studies is essential for developing more nuanced analyses of populist movements and their implications for democracy. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches academic debates but also offers practical insights for policymakers and civil society actors seeking to counter the divisive effects of populist politics. In this context, an analysis of the discursive techniques used by populist leaders in their election campaigns shows that political psychology can offer important insights into voter mobilization attempts. Through focusing on the interaction of populist narratives, personality traits, and emotional appeals, this dissertation aims to contribute to a better understanding of how leaders such as Erdoğan and Orbán shape domestic and foreign political discourses to consolidate their power.

#### **2.4. General Assumptions and Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to examine the political psychology of populist international relations and how countries’ leaders can direct their voters in favor of maintaining their hold on power. To achieve this, it is first necessary to position populism within the framework of international relations theories. As stated earlier, contemporary right-wing populism aligns with certain aspects of the three theoretical approaches discussed. Another key argument of this study is that states and their leaders shape international relations through the populist rhetoric they employ. Consequently, a populist state not only influences international relations but also does so through its own foreign policy-making process. At first glance, populism appears to be a

concept primarily confined to domestic politics. However, this dissertation argues that populism should be situated within international relations theories. Finally, just as populism shapes domestic politics, it also influences foreign policy. Therefore, analyzing the rhetoric of the selected countries' leaders during specific election periods in the context of foreign policy-making processes will provide valuable insights into the political psychology of international relations.

This dissertation aims to make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature by examining populist foreign policy through the lens of political psychology. It looks at how emotions, especially fear and perceived threats, are incorporated into populist discourse and used strategically to influence both domestic voters and international relations. Using CDA, the study focuses on election speeches to explore how these emotions are framed and employed by populist leaders.

Based on these ideas, the study examines selected political discourses in a comparative way and presents a set of research questions that guide the analysis. The main research question of the dissertation is: How does political psychology contribute to the understanding of populist international relations? In order to answer this, the following related questions are explored:

- How are “us versus them” narratives built? Why are these important?
- How do leaders utilize populist discursive dichotomy to shape public opinion and international relations?
- Why is populist discourse necessary for leaders to maintain power in their countries?
- What is the role of populism and political psychology in foreign policy decision-making processes?
- How does a leader's discourse change in response to electoral concerns, and what impact does this have on foreign policy?

These questions are addressed as comparative case studies using the speeches of Hungarian and Turkish leaders in 2018 and 2022, for Orbán's speeches, and the general elections of 2018 and 2023, respectively, for Erdoğan's speeches. This dissertation demonstrates how populist politicians use foreign policy, typically considered an elite decision-making mechanism, to appeal to public opinion and reframe national goals through emotionally charged narratives. Consequently, this study contributes to the emerging field of populist foreign policy by placing populist discourse at the intersection of political psychology and international relations. In addition to improving theoretical knowledge on the global activities of populist leaders, it also

aims to provide practical insights into contemporary political dynamics, where domestic and foreign policy areas are increasingly intertwined.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This dissertation follows and uses critical discourse analysis method to reveal the verbal intentions of populist leaders while they are giving speeches and therefore are carrying an aim to appeal to the people. Here, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán and Türkiye's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are the two example populist leaders. In the frame of their discourses during foreign policy executions in times of elections —following the poststructuralist frame as this frame treats the international system not as a fixed structure but as a process that is constantly reconstructed by discourses and power relations— is going to prove that populist leaders use their discourses to pursue getting support from their “loyal” voters. The rhetorical approach, corpus linguistics, and CDA are some of the primary methods used to examine political discourse (Ponton, 2016). Of these, CDA is the main emphasis of this chapter because it is particularly important in terms of the methodology and analysis techniques used in this study. Afterward the analysis model and the research tools are summarized. First, in order to provide context for this analysis and justify its relevance, it is essential to clarify the concepts of discourse and discourse analysis relevant to this study.

#### **3.1. Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis focuses on examining and analyzing how language is used (Hodges et al., 2008, p. 570). The method is used in many scientific arenas from political science (Medina & Rodríguez, 2011; Fairclough, 2012) to medical science (Cheek, 2004) —in medical science, discourse analysis method is mainly used to examine neurological and psychopathological patterns. Hodges et al. (2008) differentiated discourse analysis under formal linguistic, empirical, and critical ones. Accordingly, in order to discover the broad underlying principles of the linguistic or communicative function underlying the text, formal linguistic discourse analysis entails a structured examination of the text (Hodges et al. 2008, p. 570).

Discourse analysis may be thought of as comprehensive study of language in use given the scope of the idea. It is reasonable to identify certain commonalities in the conception and use of discourse analysis by social scientists, despite the notable disparities across discourse analysis schools and methodologies (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). These include defining the research's scope elements and the research questions, assembling the relevant information, which is typically in the form of text, conducting a close reading of the text using various linguistic tools to identify the pertinent discursive elements, and interpreting the relationships between the text and its context. The discourse analysis literature shows many classifications.

In the majority of them, it is simple to distinguish between two separate groups (Angermuller, Maingueneau, & Wodak, 2014). Discourse is defined in the first as an activity or a process that, according to micro-sociological and linguistic analysts, is primarily used to contextualize spoken language, written texts, speech actions, and turn-taking behaviors in a pragmatic understanding. In the second, the concept of discourse is interpreted within a macro-sociological and socio-historical framework as a collection of verbal and non-verbal social community behaviors, and analytical methods in this way are more interested in discourse-based power relations (Angermuller et al., 2014, p.13).

Discourse analysis is a qualitative, interpretative, and constructionist tool for examining social phenomena carrying a poststructuralist side as well. It investigates how socially generated concepts and things come to be and how they are maintained in the world. It also includes a set of presumptions about the beneficial impacts of language in addition to a set of procedures for performing systematic, qualitative analyses of texts (Marshall et al., 1993). Discourse analysis offers a deeper examination of the precarious condition of meaning, even if it shares a concern with the meaningfulness of social life.

Discourse analysis assumes that discourse cannot be separated from its larger context (Fairclough, 1992). Discourses lack an intrinsic meaning of their own, hence it is up to researchers to identify them historically and socially in order to comprehend their beneficial impacts. All discourse's meanings are formed, sustained, and challenged through the creation, diffusion, and consumption of texts and arise from interactions between the social groups and the complex societal institutions in which the discourse is entrenched (Hardy, 2001, p. 28).

Discourse analysis makes the underlying assumption that discourse, which refers to the creation of meaning, its content, and the arrangement of information in a given area, is essential to social and political activity (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Parker, 1990). Discourses define the parameters of what is understandable in voice, thinking, and deed. Understanding discourses, then, entails comprehending the underlying rationale of a certain arena's social and political organization and acknowledging that this arrangement and the power and meaning structures that support it are socially produced rather than naturally occurring.

According to Laffey and Weldes (2004), discourse is not the same as language. They characterize discourse as consisting of both structure and practice. Discourses are social and cultural resources that individuals employ to generate meaning about their surroundings and daily activities (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 193). These are meaning-in-use structures in



practice. The nature of discourses is political. They deal with the creation and distribution of power, conflicts over information, interests, identities, and social relationships they support or obstruct. Discourse is beneficial, it creates the subjects, objects, and relationships between them. They also generate truth by defining the standards by which statements are evaluated (Laffey & Weldes, 2004, p. 28). Since it looks at the contexts that make practices, both linguistic and otherwise, discourse analysis is always about power and politics. As a result, it highlights the ideological labor that goes into creating meaning as well as the ideological ramifications of certain meaning-in-use structures (Laffey & Weldes, 2004, p. 29).

While texts rather than individual words or phrases are the focus of discourse analysis, Wodak and Meyer (2008) defined it as the study of language on bigger units. They substituted new analytical elements like texts, discourses, dialogues, speech actions, or communicative experiences for sentences or words. Discourse analysis was seen as “the expansion of linguistics beyond grammar towards a study of activity and interaction” by these scholars (Wodak & Meyer, 2008, p. 2). Written and spoken language are both included in discourse analysis. The main goal of discourse analysis, according to Chimombo and Roseberry (1988), is to give a better understanding of texts and how language users comprehend them. Every discourse represents distinct knowledge and approaches the subject from a different perspective because discourses use language in a variety of ways. Discourse analysis tries to demonstrate how discourses create and reflect understanding by employing language in particular ways in this regard (Manzoor et al., 2019).

Since political texts will be the main focus of this work, with a particular emphasis on the conceptual component of “us versus them” dichotomy, the social dimensions and elements of the discourse analysis are crucial. As a secondary concern, it is hard to find absolute neutrality in any text because every conversation is full of values, biases, ideas, etc. The quote of “how did that particular statement come about instead of another?” may only reveal this feature to the bare minimum, as Foucault (2013, p. 30) clearly states. In order to expose the explicit and implicit power relations created by the discourses of “us” versus “them” and to emphasize CDA as a suitable research framework in this specific study, these factors make a critical engagement with the texts all but inevitable. Instead of focusing on the frequency or amount of emphasis on us and them in the speeches of leaders, using CDA opens up a ground to explore the political psychological aspect of populist political discourses.

### **3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

In the 1990s, academics including Van Dijk, Fairclough, Kress, van Leeuwen, and Wodak proposed the concept of CDA. Van Dijk (1995) viewed CDA as the umbrella term for a particular methodology that originated in critical linguistics and critical semiotics and may be used to the analysis of both speech and text. Van Dijk (1995) also viewed the socio-political and oppositional examination of language, discourse, and communication as the core of this approach. Discourse analyzers (or CDAs) start with the premise that language usage is always social and, as a result, both shape and reflect society. One of CDA's objectives is to shed light on the linguistic-discourse component of late-modern social and cultural phenomena and change processes (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). CDA can be utilized as both a theory and a method to describe, comprehend, and clarify relationships between language and society. It varies from earlier approaches to discourse analysis in that it provides an explanation of why and how discourses function in addition to a description and interpretation of discourse in context (Rogers, 2004).

CDA is a term used by scholars in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, and philosophy to refer to a much broader field that includes all social practices, people, and institutions that allow for or justify a particular understanding of phenomena as well as specific claims about what is "true" (Amoussou & Allagbé, 2018; Kress, 1990). The focus of CDA, which has roots in constructivism, is power in particular (O'Regan & MacDonald, 2009). Michel Foucault's discourse studies, for instance, demonstrated how certain discourses systematically generate interpretations of social reality (Hook, 2001). At this level, discourse analysis includes not just analyzing the text and the social uses of language but also examining the ways in which certain institutions and human roles are made feasible by particular ways of thinking and speaking.

Discourse is socially conditioned and socially constructive; it creates circumstances, knowledge objects, social identities, and interactions between individuals and groups of individuals (Wodak, 2009, p.37). According to Lucke (1996, p. 20), the goal or purpose of CDA is to disarticulate and analyze texts in order to challenge conventional wisdom. It is possible to think of CDA as attempting to critically analyze relevant textual concerns. Because it views language as a social practice, the context of language is essential. Both spoken and written materials should be critically and constructively analyzed. CDA focuses on a text-oriented form of discourse analysis and discourse, which is a significant form of social practice that, in addition to influence other social practices and structures, recreates and modifies knowledge, identities, and social interactions, including power relations (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). As power,

dominance, and social inequality are the main topics of study in CDA, the term “critical” primarily refers to the investigation of power relations in text and voice. Van Dijk (1995) identified CDA as an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary area of study with an emphasis on politics and culture that examines how discourse and society interact. At this point, it is worth noting that both Erdoğan’s and Orbán’s discourses, especially their references in religious-cultural contexts, serve as illustrative examples of this dimension of CDA, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Establishing linkages between textual characteristics, discourse practice’s futures —text generation, consumption, and dissemination— and broader sociocultural practice is the goal of CDA (Fairclough, 2012, p. 87). Its secondary goal is not to offer conclusive solutions, but rather to broaden horizons, make us aware of our own weaknesses, and help us see our own unconscious goals or motives as well as those of others. It examines actual, frequently prolonged instances of social interaction that include language overtones. It is a tool for people who are attempting to deal with the isolating and incapacitating impacts of changes that have been forced upon them. According to this approach, spoken or written materials that represent interactions, talks, dialogues, or exchanges regarding the subjects being studied should be critically analyzed (p. 107). CDA is particularly interested in and driven by the effort to grasp urgent social challenges (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 252). According to Wodak and Mayer (2009, p. 7) CDA emphasizes the necessity for multidisciplinary research in order to properly comprehend how language acts in creating and disseminating knowledge in organizing social organizations. Human beings utilize texts to make sense of their reality and to develop social acts and interactions in the work of everyday life (Lucke, 1996, p. 12). CDA examines the root causes and long-term effects of problems. Therefore, it necessitates a careful analysis of the connections between text, conversation, society, and culture (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, p. 448). It seeks to expose the politics and reason behind the support or criticism of a certain study methodology, claim, or value (Locke, 2004, p. 1). In this respect, the speeches delivered by the leaders during election periods, which are examined in this thesis, were selected from the official government and presidential websites, where the speeches made during rallies or campaign events were transcribed and published in written form.

The success of CDA may be gauged using the standard of linguistics research because it is primarily situated in a linguistic context. In spoken texts like dialogues, language may be used to convey the opinions, views, and ideas of speakers (Mogaoshoa, 2014, p. 105). If CDA is able to account for the function of language, verbal skills, discourse, or communicative events in the

construction of domination and inequality, then it will be able to offer a major and distinctive addition to critical social or political analyses (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 279; McGregor, 2010, p. 2). Structures of texts and speech are the main focus here in theory and practice. The goal is to ascertain how the listening, speaking, reading, and writing processes relate to the actual text. As a result, it gives the ability to analyze written content critically, including researchers' own words and writing. Given the influence of the written and spoken word, CDA is essential for describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life as it is mirrored in text (McGregor, 2003, p. 2). The question of power and the social battles that result from it can be understood to hold a fundamental place in the analysis process when taking into account how Fairclough defines and explains CDA. In their explanation on this matter, Wodak and Meyer (2008) express that language alone lacks power since persons in positions of authority must also utilize language to be effective. CDA targets power elites, therefore it is also seen as a critique of the social order (Van Dijk, 1995).

There is no standardized method for data collection in CDA. Literature does not offer precise and distinct analytical frameworks for conducting research in CDA. As a result, researchers do not rely on pre-defined data collection and analytical methods (Wodak, 1994; Amoussou & Allagbé, 2018). CDA is situated in the hermeneutic tradition rather than the analytical-deductive tradition, which makes it difficult to differentiate between data collection and analysis (Wodak, 2001; Weiss & Wodak, 2003). Instead, CDA is a collection of methods with a shared theoretical foundation and research interests (Henderson, 2005). While some researchers utilize methods that are not related to sociolinguistics, others do not disclose their data collection methodology. Unlike grounded theory, CDA does not view data collection as a distinct stage that must be completed before analysis begins (Farrelly, 2020). Instead, initial analyses are conducted, indicators for specific concepts are identified, and concepts are expanded into categories after the first exercise in data collection. In practice, a CDA study focuses on those features of a written or spoken text that can change as a result of social power dynamics. These features include stress and intonation, word order, lexical style, coherence, local semantic moves such as disclaimers, topic choice, speech acts, schematic organization, rhetorical figures, syntactic structures, propositional structures, turn-taking, repairs, and hesitation (Van Dijk, 1995).

According to Fairclough (2012, p. 9), social realities have a reflexive quality, meaning that how people perceive, construe, interpret, and conceptualize social realities is a component of those realities. In other words, there are no social events or practices without representations, construal, conceptualizations, or theories of those events and practices. To put it another way,

CDA views discourse as a type of social practice and assumes that discourse has a dialectical connection with the social structures in which it is embedded (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Discourse in CDA is a social practice that is both a result of and comprise the aspects of social world conditions, institutions, events, social identities, and connections among individuals or individual groups. According to Wodak and Meyer (2009), it is “fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language” (p. 10). Discourse analysis, according to Fairclough (1992), is concerned not just with power dynamics or conflicts in discourse, but also with how these conflicts shape and alter social and institutional discourse practices (p. 36). Being critical is essential for CDA because “relationships between discursive, social, and cultural change are typically not transparent for the people involved” and CDA’s purpose is to reveal hidden causes and links in it (Fairclough, 1992, p. 9).

An essential component of a critical analysis is the comprehension and exposure of power relations. In order to understand how discourse (re)produces social dominance, CDA scholars frequently examine how people in authority utilize language (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 9). Van Dijk focuses on ideological discourse structures in the discourse component since CDA is concerned in power relations and the texts and dialogues under consideration are thought to be ideologically motivated. Polarization, pronouns, identification, the focus on positive self-descriptions and negative other-descriptions, activities —what they do, what they should do — norms and ideals, and interests are some of the most notable examples of these ideological discourse systems. Following this rationale, in the scope of this particular study, populist political discourse should be separately examined in the frame of what has been expressed for CDA.

### **3.3. Populist Political Discourse**

Political discourses and the acts that create them are ideological. Political leaders and their parties must be ideologically aware since they use ideological discourses to fight against other groups, obtain power, and exceed. In the discourse component, Van Dijk highlights the significance of ideological structures in discourse, given that CDA focuses on power dynamics and considers texts and speech as inherently ideological. These structures include polarization, the strategic use of pronouns, processes of identification, the emphasis on positive self-representation and negative portrayal of others, actions and expectations, underlying norms and values, and specific interests (Van Dijk, 2006). According to him (2006), ideas are made visible

by discourses, and much like other ideologies, political ideologies can only be stated, developed, spread, and challenged through discourse. Hence, for populist leaders, Orbán and Erdoğan in this study, discourses are the most effective and significant vehicle to transmit and mobilize their citizens during the times of elections. These are the most suitable times to mobilize the people, and even politicians who have made mistakes before the elections have a chance to turn the momentum that is going against them to their advantage with the discourse they use during election periods. Therefore, paying utmost attention to the rhetoric of populist leaders during election periods has the potential to turn the election results in their favor.

Political discourses may only serve political purposes when they are used in conjunction with political processes or actions like legislating or ruling that have very clear political objectives like supporting or opposing a legislation or winning an election (Van Dijk, 2006). Political subjects must thus possess political knowledge and agree on common standards, values, and beliefs in addition to political ideology. In-group, out-group polarization in politics is achieved by the selection of issues that are more favorable to “our” group or party and the accentuation of the disadvantages of the out-group, such as political rivals (Van Dijk, 2006). Moreover, word arrangement, heading, topicalization, repetition, intonation or stress, visual or graphical aids, and other elements can all improve understanding. For instance, in most of the European countries’ politics, hence in Hungarian politics, migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa, minorities and immigrants are frequently linked to issues and crimes in political discourse and framed as in the out-group. As for the Turkish politics, the main opposition party in the parliament and other dissidents who are under the impact of outsiders or outside powers, are settled in out-group frame. The difference between Hungarian and Turkish political discourse will be detailed later.

Debates about populism involve various perspectives on its definition, with the current emphasis shifting toward considerable controversy over the methods used to measure it. When examining populism from a discursive perspective, it becomes evident that there is limited consensus on its ontological nature (Poblete, 2015). Various methodological approaches and techniques exhibit substantive differences. Three perspectives on populism can be classified, each representing contemporary attempts to evaluate populism from a rhetorical frame. The first is the poststructuralist approach rooted in Laclau’s theory, the second is a mixed approach combining positivism with hermeneutic techniques in holistic grading, and the third is content analysis—a more classical and quantitative approach involving the counting of phrases within texts (Poblete, 2015, p. 201). Despite their distinctions, these approaches share some

commonalities: a similar concept of populism, acknowledgment that structural factors trigger populist discourse, and the identification of a leader as a catalyst for populist discourse (p. 201).

The increasing prevalence of the term populism in political analysis and beyond is now a widespread phenomenon. This shift to populism not only involves investigating populist politics as a subject of study but also involves adopting populism as an analytical framework (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021). It is important to explicitly address the issues associated with the emphasis on populism as an independent subject and to consider the consequences of such an interpretation for the field of populism studies.

Various methods can be employed to convey discourse structures, which differ depending on the genre of discourse. The rhetorical method, corporal linguistics, and CDA are three important currents in the study of political speech (Ponton, 2016). For instance, when the focus is on “our good things and their bad things”, techniques such as foregrounding, headlines, active sentences, hyperbole, and repetition can be employed to highlight and amplify positive aspects. Conversely, strategies like implicit information, small letters, passive sentences, euphemisms, and backgrounding can be used to downplay and minimize negative aspects (Van Dijk, 2016 as cited in Gerim, 2022).

In terms of epistemology, three approaches can be distinguished based on their methods for assessing populist discourse. Poststructuralism has consistently faced methodological limitations due to the absence of clearly defined research strategies. Nonetheless, as suggested by David Howarth, this approach should be interpreted within a hermeneutic framework, requiring researchers to conduct second-order interpretations of the actions and social practices under examination (Howarth, 2005). The second approach also advocates for a hermeneutic approach to accessing discourse but within a positivist research context. Consequently, it becomes feasible to uncover the latent meaning of the text through interpretative analysis, allowing subsequent classification of evidence according to predefined positivist categories. Conversely, the third approach adheres strictly to a positivist and quantitative stance, involving the encoding of phrases and/or words in texts, enabling analysts to categorize them based on their degree of populist intensity (Poblete, 2015, p. 202).

In terms of spatial orientation, populism is structured along a vertical axis denoting power, status, and hierarchical socio-cultural and/or socio-economic positioning, expressed as a down/up or high/low orientation (Dyrberg, 2005; Laclau, 1977; Ostiguy, 2009). Populist discourse commonly employs terms like “the people” and “the elite” to signify these vertical

identities, but it also utilizes various other labels. The key element is that populists assert to advocate for the “ordinary people”, “the little man”, “the common man”, or “the man in the street” as the down-group or underdog. Simultaneously, they reject “the establishment”, “the political caste”, or “the ruling class” as the up group, arguing that these entities fail to represent “the people” and jeopardize its interests. In discourses dominated by populism, where the structural dynamics adhere to the populist logic of uniting diverse demands and identities within a populist chain of equivalence, formed in a down/up contrast with an elite, “the people” not only holds a central position in the discursive articulation but also functions as an empty signifier. In essence, “the people” operates as an expression without a fixed meaning or reference (Laclau, 2005, pp. 69–72 and 161–163).

Laclau’s conceptualization of populism has exerted considerable influence in the examination of populist politics, even if this impact has not consistently been acknowledged explicitly (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 122). For Laclau, populism ultimately evolves into a synonymous concept with politics itself (2005, p. 67), prompting consideration of how to differentiate between the two concepts (Arditi, 2016; Beasley-Murray, 2006; Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 263). In contrast to Laclau’s perspective (2005a; 2005b), this interpretation regards populism as a specific type of politics.

More than alternative approaches, a discourse-theoretical definition places emphasis on how populism verbally constructs “the people” by setting up an antagonistic dynamic between “the people” and “the elite”. It explicitly underscores the active construction of “the people” in comparison to ideational interpretations of populism as a (thin) ideology, such as those proposed by Mudde (2007) and Stanley (2008). This shift from ideology to the discursive construction and assertion of representing “the people” by populists enables a more comprehensive consideration of populism’s vital strategic aspects (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014), along with its material, performative, and affective dimensions (Moffitt, 2016). Nevertheless, this discourse-theoretical definition resembles the “thin ideology” definition developed by Mudde and others due to its “minimal” nature. It concentrates on the opposition between “the people” and “the elite” and on the populist claim to represent “the people” excluding all other (ideological) characteristics of specific populist politics (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 311).

Adopting a discourse-theoretical standpoint, populist politics adheres to a specific political logic. According to Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 136), these logics are “constructed and named by the analyst” to recognize and comprehend the “rules or grammar of a practice under study”. Viewing populism as a political logic entails identifying how it owing to address and



mobilizing individuals, articulating demands, and challenging existing regimes or upholding power relations (Glynos, 2008, p. 278). Examining populism through the lens of a particular logic, as Laclau referred to it as “the populist reason”, formalizes the understanding of populism. This shift directs attention away from the specifics of populism—such as the concrete demands put forth by populist actors or their ideology (Laclau, 2005b, p. 33). The inquiry shifts to understanding the distinctive aspects of how populists articulate their demands. Beyond the central theme of the antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite”, populists unite various demands and identities in what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) refer to as a “chain of equivalence”, symbolized by the signifier “people”. Populists mobilize and concurrently amplify or strengthen discontent with “the elite” due to its (actual and/or perceived) obstruction or threat to various demands, interests, or identities (Stanley, 2008, p. 98; Moffitt, 2015).

To comprehend the widespread prevalence of discourses on populism and the impactful outcomes of these discourses, it is essential to move beyond normative intentions. Instead, a closer examination of dynamics within the academic discourse on populism and its interplay with media and politics becomes crucial. Going beyond populism studies in this context entails that studies on populism should not exclusively concentrate on the populist aspect of the politics they examine. Instead, the analysis should be broadened to encompass how populism intersects with other dimensions like nationalism, socialism, conservatism, and more. Additionally, it should consider the broader political, cultural, economic, and social context within which these politics unfold. This approach also suggests treating populism as a valuable yet limited concept that should be incorporated into a more extensive conceptual framework. The specific components of this framework depend on the characteristics of populist politics under scrutiny and the nature of the research questions posed. At this point, considering the question of this work, examining populism from the political psychological perspective will also add another dimension to populism studies.

### **3.4. Political Psychology and Discourse Analysis**

Political psychology has consistently been centered around addressing problems. Regardless of where its origins are traced, it emerges from social issues and enigmas that manifest throughout history and in specific contexts. Van Ginneken (1988) asserts that political psychology revolves around the need for control, regulation, and understanding (p. 6), a characteristic shared by various scientific pursuits. Over time, significant historical events have shaped entire research agendas. In political psychology, issues related to race, ethnicity, and racism have surfaced in distinct historical and structural contexts, giving rise to diverse sets of concerns (Nesbitt-

Larking & Kinnvall, 2012). Since its inception as an academic discipline in the 1970s, political psychologists have found it analytically beneficial to create spatial maps of the field. Specifically, they aim to trace the origins, evolution, and influence of political psychology across various countries (Feldman, 1990; Lamare & Milburn, 1990; Nesbitt-Larking, 2004; Shumao, 1996) and regions (Bryder, 1986; Kinnvall, 2003; Montero, 1986; Pye, 1986).

In cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and social studies the term discourse analysis is employed by researchers to encompass a broader domain. This includes all social practices, individuals, and institutions that facilitate or legitimize a specific understanding of phenomena and enable the articulation of certain claims about what is deemed “true”. Discourse analysis, deeply rooted in constructivism, places a particular emphasis on power dynamics. For instance, Michel Foucault’s discourse analyses demonstrated how specific discourses systematically construct versions of the social world (McHoul & Grace, 2015). At this level, discourse analysis in general not only scrutinizes text and the social functions of language but also investigates how the very existence of particular institutions and the roles assigned to individuals is made possible by prevailing modes of thinking and speaking (Hodge, 2017). Discourse analysis involves examining how speech and written language are employed to accomplish various actions. Discursive psychology applies concepts from discourse analysis to psychological issues, presenting a perspective that encompasses meta-theoretical, theoretical, and analytical principles. Unlike a specific method, it focuses on Chomsky’s initial differentiation: while cognitive and social psychology predominantly address people’s inherent competence, discursive psychology prioritizes the study of performance (Potter, 2003).

Within political psychology, two primary approaches compete for dominance: positivism and constructionism/interpretivism (Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012). Positivist social science, originating in the works of Comte and Durkheim, employs rationalist and technical tools akin to those in the natural sciences. It aims to unveil evolutionary laws that elucidate observed phenomena, either through empirical observation (positivist empiricism) or deductive logic (logical positivism). The influence of these traditions is evident in a revised form of positivism that blends Comte’s focus on empirical verifiability with Hume’s (and subsequently Durkheim’s) causality theory (p. 48). Comte and Durkheim laid the groundwork for positivism, while Hegel and Marx introduced non-positivist, interpretivist research methods, later encompassed under terms like constructionism, critical theory, and structuralism. These theories were developed in response to the evolving landscape of urban and industrial modernity. Interpretivist approaches prioritize the empathic comprehension of human actions

over external forces that may lack significance for those involved. Interpretivism recognizes the distinction between people as subjects and the objects studied in natural sciences, emphasizing the necessity of understanding subjective meanings to comprehend social action. The fundamental contrast between positivist and interpretivist perspectives lies in their focus on explaining versus understanding human behavior (Hollis & Smith, 1990). Constructionism (or constructivism) emerges as an ontological stance derived from interpretivism, asserting that social phenomena and their meanings are continually shaped by social actors. This implies that such phenomena and categories not only arise from social interaction but are also in a constant state of flux. The constructionist approach accommodates the perspectives of social scientists, whose knowledge is seen as uncertain, and their descriptions of the social world are considered constructions in themselves. The convergence of the two aspects of social science, positivist and interpretivist, occurs in the synthesis attributed to Weber, who stands as the initial—and for an extended period, the sole—scholar to integrate both epistemologies. Zeitlin's examination of the history of sociological theory designates Weber as the scholar who reconciled a materialist and an ideational explanation of the development of modern societies (Zeitlin, 2001, pp. 197–199).

Tileagă (2013) has emphasized the significance of a critical political psychology, asserting that discursive psychology holds substantial potential in this regard. While political psychology is flourishing, it tends to prioritize mainstream, quantitative research methods and epistemology, often neglecting the broader array of non-quantitative approaches (Tileagă, 2013). The discursive frames within the different research hubs in political psychology are naturally contextualized. This means they are rooted in the knowledge, values, and phenomenologies specific to the times and locations where political psychology has emerged (Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012). A significant portion of the initial research in discursive psychology has concentrated on the examination of political discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The foundational text for discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) frequently draws on instances of political discourse to illustrate its key points, especially when advocating for a discursive psychology approach to fact construction. Subsequently, fact construction has been a recurring theme in various discursive psychology studies, including those explore political subjects (Lynn & Lea, 2003; Burke & Demasi, 2019). Adopting a social constructionist stance, discursive psychology focuses on scrutinizing psychological phenomena as contextualized discursive actions. Discursive psychology investigates how psychological discourse is employed and directed in conversations and examines in depth the achievements

people make in interactions, rather than using this information to draw conclusions about cognition (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

To conclude, the method of dissertation, CDA, and discursive psychology used in political psychology studies overlap in terms of purpose. In this respect, the CDA discussed within the framework of the study is a suitable method in terms of making sense of international relations' political psychology in the frame of the leaders' populist discourses as intended. The integration of CDA with discursive psychology provides a valuable lens through which to examine studies in political psychology. Furthermore, when combined with CDA, interpretive research methods provide a framework for exploring political psychology and analyzing the potential impact of leaders' rhetoric on electoral outcomes. As Le Bon (1895) noted, "the masses are vulnerable to persuasion and seduction", meaning that selective elites could use polarizing language or nationalism to influence and manipulate public sentiment. As indicated earlier, studies in literature on political psychology and discourse analysis have often remained predominantly quantitative. However, the use of interpretive methods to draw inferences from data collected by researchers in social sciences has the potential to contribute to literature from a different perspective.

### **3. 5. 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 (Ekström et al., 2018).

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 (Charteris-Black, 2005; Ponton, 2016). 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 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 on voters of the rhetoric of two leaders who both want to maintain their parties' hold on power. In order to do this, the research primarily looks at the propaganda periods leading up to the general elections in the specified years. The propaganda discourses analyzed in this study were selected only from official written transcripts published on the websites of the prime ministry and presidency 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 a fertile analytical ground not only for revealing the discursive construction of populist narratives, but also for revealing 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 (Ete, 2018), as it includes many new regulations that carries a potential to affect the voting behavior of the voters. The 2023 elections were also an appropriate election period to examine the effects of populist discourses on political psychology, as those were elections held under the shadow of economic depression, earthquakes, and decrees with the force of law issued during the state of emergency in general.

For Hungary, the 2018 elections were the first general elections that would test whether Orbán would be able to restore the government that weakened in 2014 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 a 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 last two general election periods specifically. In the frame of this dissertation, 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 propaganda speeches of

leaders, the focus is the foreign policy related discourses. This opens a way to make sense of populist international relations' political psychology through two example countries.

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>15</sup> was used for the gathering and analysis of 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 on each page, the first speech covering the election period begins on page 25 (20 speeches) and ends on page 23 (18 speeches), meaning a total of 68 speeches were examined. 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.

For the 2022 elections, the Government of Hungary<sup>16</sup> website was used again via a different link. Normally, each page contains seven speeches. The first speech in the propaganda 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 and 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 propaganda 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

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<sup>15</sup> Kormányzat-Miniszterelnök-Hírek <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek?items=30&page=1>

<sup>16</sup> <https://kormany.hu/miniszterelnok/beszedek-interjuk>

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>17</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 propaganda 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 provide valuable insights for further exploration.

No computer-based programs were used during the collection and analysis of speeches and discourses, and 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 of international relations theories used in this study and provides a deeper focus on the political psychological aspects of populist international relations. Furthermore, themes such as fear, heroism, 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, being the main point and claim is domestic politics and foreign policy are intertwined, and leaders use their speeches during foreign policy implications again to get

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/>

or pursue their support from electorates, discourse examples have been chosen from the times of elections. Even though leaders deliver messages to appeal to the people, yet in the meantime they enforce the foreign policy implications, they use “us” versus “them” dichotomy to draw a frame for make people to 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 in the beginning of this study, representative democracy provides opportunity for the populist leaders to justify their acts and through pointing out the ballot boxes they can subjectify their victory as “ballot box victory”.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

There are a few explanations for why CDA has drawn more attention over the past twenty years. According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), one principle may be identified as having the capacity to support modern democracy by providing strategies for contesting authority over language usage in social contexts. Understanding and elucidating the pivotal role of dominating political forces over certain social conceptions, like the country, requires a critical knowledge of language. Consequently, CDA can offer a useful study framework for examining linguistic dominance in connection to social notions generally, and as Wodak (2002) claims, the “critical” component can also be interpreted as a reference to the researcher’s position. Political discourse analysis is by definition crucial as the researcher’s political perspective cannot be fully understood and political language cannot be analyzed without the researcher’s political intuitions (Chilton, 2004; 2010). Nonetheless, some view CDA as a separate kind of political activity carried out in the name of social justice, liberation, etc. Since they must remain the focus of any research, such a “critical” knowledge is unable to offer fresh viewpoints or enhance the comprehension of human nature, particularly our political nature. This method is used in this study to critically analyze pertinent discourse. Since CDA involves interpretation, the possibility of subjectivity was taken into account during the research. To minimize bias, only formal and written versions of speeches were used, and the same methodology was applied to both case studies. The analysis followed a clear set of theoretical and methodological guidelines to remain consistent and transparent. These steps were taken to make the findings more reliable, recognizing that complete objectivity is not possible in discourse analysis.

The data analysis will be based on the discourses of the leaders through the method of CDA analysis, as mentioned above. The main pragmatic reasons for choosing this method are that CDA provides a logical and convenient framework for the study of political psychology and



populist discourses together. In this way, by focusing on the distinction between us and them in the discourse of leaders, it is shown what messages they actually give to the people they address and thus how they choose foreign policy discourses to influence domestic politics.

This study will investigate how the chosen texts operationalize and build the us and them narrative in the political arena using the socio-linguistic method that serves as its primary axis. This will expose the particular and shared elements of the populist language of the two leaders as well as the discursive structures of the divided society. It should be mentioned at this point that while the theoretical chapter's insights and the analytical tools taken from the CDA offer a framework for both analyses, the research depends on interpretative reading and analysis within this framework.

It performs thorough a semantic analysis of the case data in place of quantitative evaluations like frequency analysis and statistical computations. According to this inclination, a comprehensive hermeneutic method is used to study the texts from each case as a whole. Instead of identifying key words and using a broad coding scheme based on them, the research will look at every passage where the words “us” and “them” are directly mentioned, as well as every pertinent passage that provides an opportunity to reveal the populist strategies of the leaders. Therefore, the goal is to determine the types of semantic networks and linkages that populist discourses are made up of in the examples examined in this thesis, as well as the effects of these networks.

The study contains some restrictions in terms of language usage. All analyses will be conducted on translated texts, with the Hungarian case also including texts originally written in English. Since the chosen methodology and approach are confined to semantic analysis and do not extend to a comprehensive semiotic analysis—encompassing syntax and pragmatics alongside semantics (Føllesdal, 1997)—the influence of the original languages' characteristics will be relatively limited. While it is evident that completely eliminating the potential negative effects of this situation on the study is unlikely, every effort will be made to minimize their impact.

Furthermore, it should be noted that multiple approaches may be used to critically analyze the texts taken into consideration in this study, or even the same technique used to the same texts might provide rather different results. Since interpretation is a subjective process in qualitative research, the point of subjectivity is constantly questioned in this technique, as in virtually all other qualitative research methodologies (Bryman, 2012, p. 405). Being open and honest about

the methods used for data selection, collection, and processing is the only way to solve this problem, and this methodological chapter aims to achieve this very goal.

## CHAPTER 4. HUNGARIAN CASE

### 4.1. Rising Right-wing Populism in Hungary

#### 4.1.1. Historical Background

Populism in Hungary can be traced back to the Orbán's first coming to power in the beginning of the 2000's. The main rising populism in today's meaning on the other hand, has started with Orbán's being elected in the beginning of the 2010's (Laczó, 2018). Nevertheless, historical background of Hungary can give glimpses of contemporary populist politics in the country. Hungary held its first multi-party general election in 1990 after more than 40 years of single-party rule. Elections have been held every four years since then and have all successfully formed governments. However, this stability has not extended to individual party support. For example, the MDF, which won in 1990, declined in 1998, while FIDESZ, which started with minimal representation in 1990, became the dominant party in 1998. Similarly, the MSZP, the successor to the former communist party, has experienced a notable increase in popularity (Mészáros et al., 2007).

While Hungary's post-transformation path initially became liberal democratic in nature, party political disillusionment intensified in the late 2000s. Enyedi (2016) states that during this period there emerged a decline in ideological party allegiances as well as an increase in populist sentiments, that made the ground for Orbán's rhetoric fertile enough. Far from bursting out in 2010, numerous populist trends were already present in political discourse as well as in public discontent before Orbán's comeback into power in 2010.

Hungary was in a political crisis long before 2010 (Deák, 2013, p. 145). Public approval of political institutions and parties had sagged considerably in the late 2000s. For example, according to Eurobarometer data in 2009, just 23% of Hungarian respondents had faith in their national parliament, while political parties were trusted by just 19% (European Commission, 2009). The 2010 elections proved to be critical, and a new environment was created for party politics. The two parties that played a dominant role in the 1990 transition period and have been permanently represented in all parliaments since then, the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*, SZDSZ) and the moderately conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum*, MDF), have virtually disappeared. The Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*, MSZP), which has been the left pole of Hungarian politics since 1994 and won a majority (in coalition with the liberals) for three terms

(1994-98, 2002-10), received a considerably reduced share of the mandates. (Deák, 2013, p. 146). However, Jobbik – Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik – Magyarországért Mozgalom*; commonly referred to as Jobbik), a radical right-wing party, could take 12.18% of the seats by capitalizing on its combative anti-Gypsy rhetoric. LMP – Hungary’s Green Party (LMP – *Lehet Más a Politika*, also known as Politics Can Be Different), a newly formed green liberal party could constitute a small part of it. Considering that the party spectrum has remained virtually unchanged since 2000, these changes demonstrate that Hungarian society has a deep distrust of its own political class. Hence, Orbán’s promise of change for the better and his hope of gaining approval for his anti-liberal turn were well calculated. The crisis of the Republic of 1989<sup>18</sup> was multifaceted and to some extent repeated some patterns of the past (Deák, 2013, p. 147).

Party system fragmentation, together with cultural backlash and economic uncertainty, supported the institutionalization of far-right rhetoric in Hungary. Orbán’s capacity to adjust to these altered sentiments enabled Fidesz to own the narrative space that conventional organizations had neglected (Varga & Buzogány, 2020). Körösenyi (1998, p. 303) noted that Hungary’s post-transition era saw enduring conflicts between democratic institutions and authoritativeness. Such an environment made it easy for populist forces that were able to ride on popular discontent as well as nationalism sentiments.

Before the 2010 elections, expectations for the Fidesz government were quite different. Memories of the first Orbán government (1998-2002) remained for many as a pro-market, moderately conservative force. Fidesz lost its long-held monopolistic position on the right (Kim, 2016). As the 2010s approached, Jobbik’s growing influence was seen in the 2009 European Parliament elections. The party managed to send three representatives to the European Parliament after receiving around 15% of the vote. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, they received 17% of the vote, making them the third strongest party in parliament. MSZP received the second most votes, less than three percentage points behind (Rakovics & Barna, 2024). Orbán was in opposition from 2002 to 2010. As 2010 approached, the already disaffected public became reluctant to reform as a result of the 2008 financial crisis. Orbán capitalized on this discontent by presenting himself as the last chance for reform. Fidesz’s combination of social paternalism, promises of tax cuts, and pro-market policies strengthened Orbán’s electoral position and led him to demand significant reform of the political system

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<sup>18</sup> It refers to Hungary’s post-communist political system, which faces problems such as public discontent with political elites, economic difficulties, and unmet expectations from the 1989 democratic transition.

(Deák, 2013 & Buzogány, 2017). In order to improve Fidesz's reputation, Orbán hired American strategist Arthur Finkelstein that same year. Finkelstein suggested that Orbán use nationalist language to draw on Hungary's history, particularly the Jewish philanthropist George Soros, as a proxy for the harmful effects of globalization. Fidesz easily won the 2010 parliamentary elections thanks to this tactic (Kenes, 2020). Unlike the first term of government, when Fidesz was governed on a relatively collective basis, by 2010 Orbán transformed the party into a highly centralized political instrument based on his personal authority and popularity (Deák, 2013, p. 153). The issue of national unity was important for Orbán to respect both foreign and domestic policy. One of the government's first acts was to grant citizenship to all ethnic Hungarians abroad. The issue of Hungarian minorities abroad was a long-standing problem in Hungary's foreign policy and was a legacy of the drama of the Trianon Peace Treaty (Waterbury, 2006). Opposing this, Fidesz revealed that it advocated the extension of citizenship despite the initiative suffering a humiliating defeat in a national referendum in 2004. This step was central to Orbán's nationalist agenda, serving primarily as a symbolic gesture aimed at securing the support of conservatives and maximizing votes, particularly among Hungarians living abroad. This symbolic move, along with other measures such as the designation of the Trianon Day of Mourning, was one of the biggest promises to be fulfilled despite the tensions with neighboring countries (Deák, 2013, p. 153, 154).

The issue of Hungarian minorities abroad is a strong concept of Visegrad and regional cooperation, emphasizing respect for national sovereignty and a corresponding focus on the concept of a Europe of Nations (Veres, 2015). Orbán's political beliefs include a strong national identity as well as concern for Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries (Pogonyi, 2015). Fidesz did not have a strong pro-Atlantic sentiment but retained many of the reservations against Russia typical of Eastern European conservative parties (Zgut-Przybylska, 2024). This was the first Fidesz coalition in which Hungary joined NATO, and the party had historically supported the Western integration process without any reservations. Most of the foreign policy differences in the two-party system of Hungarian politics centered on issues related to Hungarian minorities and thus to neighborly relations (Deák, 2013, p. 162).

Viktor Orbán's revolution is often characterized by Western media as a response to the financial crisis (Tóth, 2015). This is partly true; the crisis dealt the final blow to Gyúresány's Socialist government and made his Party's decline irreversible. After the 2006 elections, the austerity policy lost its meaning; the crisis deprived governments of these advantages. But the relationship between Orbán's policies and the economic crisis is more complex. As in the EU's

Southern periphery, the crisis has only magnified existing policy weaknesses and made mismanagement unsustainable (Körösényi & Patkós, 2017). Change was a necessity for all these countries, and Viktor Orbán regularly speaks of the crisis as a legacy of extraordinary measures (Kirschbaum, 2012). His logic is at odds with a declining Europe and the IMF, not only in terms of economic policies but sometimes even in terms of potential political reforms. The crisis has become one of the main narratives of their policies, even though it is clear that economic policy does not have the capacity to deal with its consequences. From this perspective, this is not only a challenge for Hungary, but also an opportunity to legitimize its policies at home and abroad (Deák, 2013, p. 167, 168).

Orbán's re-election in 2010 was the precursor for what he later called an "illiberal democracy", which vision he explained most clearly in his 2014 Băile Tuşnad speech. In this speech, he cited Russia, China, and Türkiye as examples of non-liberal countries which had become highly competitive at a national level while also enjoying political stability without adhering to Western liberal values (Orbán, 2014; Pappas, 2019; Bogaards, 2018; Enyedi, 2016). This statement meant abandoning liberal democratic values in exchange for national conservation, centralized power, and reorienting Hungary's foreign relations. Orbán himself never called for an abandonment of democracy in any form, but for an alternative conception promoting state sovereignty, conserving culture, and authentic national values rather than liberal pluralism (Isaac, 2017). His ideological program was underpinned in turn by an illiberal discourse based upon national sovereignty, Christian nationhood, and a story of national rebirth. This re-orientation resonated among elements of the electorate disillusioned by earlier liberal regimes' inability to perform. Crisis management under the government in this period conformed to the logic of illiberal governance, characterized by tight executive dominance and centralized power (Merkovity et al., 2021, p. 275).

To summarize, Viktor Orbán's populism in foreign policy centers on portraying the EU and the IMF as "others" or "enemies". He frames Hungary as the true representative of European values and positions its government as the protector of Christian Europe. He argues that it is Hungary, not Brussels, that defends the fundamental values of Europe and its Christian identity. Therefore, he positions himself as a protector of the Hungarian people against these external forces and builds his populist discourse on this foundation. Although Hungary is a member of both NATO and the EU, its relations with the West are not as smooth as one might expect. During the election campaigns, Orbán's government has placed large billboards (Reuters, 2019) throughout Hungary, warning citizens that EU politicians aim to settle immigrants in the

country (Hajba, 2019). Consequently, the foreign policy decisions of the Hungarian government and its leader seek to resonate with societal attitudes as they mutually reinforce each other.

#### **4.1.2. Orbán's Leadership and Policy Making**

Orbán entered politics in the late 1980s as a young, radical, anti-communist politician. However, towards the end of the 1990s, he turned away from these radical, anti-religious and liberal principles towards conservative, nationalist, Christian and authoritarian values and principles (Hockenos, 2011). Orbán has always tried to articulate principles that would legitimize his policy. His concept of illiberal democracy may be linked to his general criticism of Western civilization. Orbán broke with the modernist, technocratic and sociological language that had dominated Hungarian political discourse since the late communist era (Szűcs, 2012) he used a vocabulary closer to the language of ordinary people. Orbán represents a self-aware, willing and optimistic attitude. He rejects the defeatist attitude of Hungarian left-liberal politicians, which fosters an inferiority complex regarding the underdeveloped Hungarian political culture towards the West.

After the political turmoil of the late 1980s, the presence of Hungarian communities abroad, nationalist policies, language barriers, and residual historical sensitivities made it difficult for Hungary to re-establish stable bilateral relations with its neighbors. However, Hungary found itself in a more advantageous geopolitical position as Euro-Atlantic organizations such as the EU and NATO grew. Hungary's foreign policy underwent a dramatic change with its entry into NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, establishing the country as a vital component of the Euro-Atlantic region (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2020). However, there were some conflicts associated with assimilation into Western frameworks. As Hungary accepted its new position in the EU, Viktor Orbán's leadership became increasingly nationalistic. As Orbán established his grip on power, he took advantage of the changing geopolitical environment to portray Hungary as the protector of its sovereignty and traditional values against external powers, and also as a member of Europe.

Orbán's populism is one of the defining figures of the last thirty years even has been an example to define contemporary right-wing populism in the international relations (Hajba, 2019; Mos & Piovezan, 2024). Their changing political orientations align with the spirit of the times, reflecting the general mood of the population and occasionally nudging issues to the surface that would otherwise remain dormant. The socialist governments that split Viktor Orbán's rule between 2002 and 2010 were criticized—often by Orbán himself—on charges of re-

establishing a dangerously close relationship with the eastern power (Sadecki, 2014), with Hungary positioned among countries with Trans-Atlantic inclinations.

Viktor Orbán's rise as political leader and prime minister in Hungary is closely linked to his success in reshaping both his own party and the entire political spectrum (Rajcsányi, 2018). After 1994, he entered the political vacuum left by the collapse of the center-right MDF through the masterful repositioning of Fidesz from a left-liberal radical youth movement to a national-liberal, moderate right-wing party. By the time of the 1998 elections, Orbán had become the leader of the political right. By winning the election, he was able to form his first cabinet with his right-of-center coalition partners. Since the larger liberal party, the SZDSZ, joined the Horn government<sup>19</sup> and entered into a permanent political alliance with the Socialist Party, the left/right conflict has become a permanent divisive dimension (Körösenyi, 2013). Thus, the liberal center disappeared from Hungarian politics. He managed to unite the entire political right in Hungary. He successfully used his term as prime minister between 1998 and 2002 to strengthen his position as the leader of the right. He gradually weakened his coalition partners, won their constituencies (Enyedi, 2005), and either integrated them into Fidesz or pushed them to the margins of politics. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, Fidesz had become a highly centralized and politically fairly homogeneous all-encompassing party. Orbán's "one flag, one camp" strategy contributed to the strong bipolarization of the political spectrum that lasted until 2010 (Körösenyi, 2013, p. 16).

EU institutions have been critical of Orbán from the start, pointing out the undemocratic nature of his policy changes and accusing him of compromising fundamental principles of the rule of law. The Hungarian prime minister has opposed Brussels' meddling in his internal affairs since his first day in office. He has argued that when his country joined the EU, it did not choose to embrace feudal ties between Brussels and Budapest (Rydlínski, 2018). Since 2010, Orbán's cabinet has embarked on a sustained fight for freedom against Brussels. In his policy making, foreign policy was rather an extension of domestic policy and diplomacy depended on his domestic policy and vote maximization efforts (Varga & Buzogány, 2021, p. 1444).

The first Orbán government did not distinguish itself in this field and gradually entered a relative isolation towards the end of its term. However, Orbán did not use harsh anti-European

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<sup>19</sup> The Horn government was the third government in Hungary after the change of regime, which was formed from a coalition of two parties, the MSZP and the SZDSZ. The coalition had a two-thirds majority in Parliament but voluntarily agreed to amend the two-thirds laws only if there was a consensus with the opposition. The government took the oath of office on July 15, 1994. After their defeat of the 1998 elections, Prime Minister Gyula Horn's term expired on 6 July 1998, and the other cabinet members' 8 July 1998.



and anti-Western rhetoric in these years (Deak, 2013, p. 163). Even though tensions with European institutions—and, to some extent, with the United States—were partly shaped by domestic political factors, Fidesz faced two key challenges. First, it needed to construct a narrative that would justify the abrupt shift in its foreign policy, particularly to its own voters. Second, it had to minimize the impact of Western responses to its policies. The two were sometimes difficult to unite, as Viktor Orbán regularly demonstrated, even in European forums, that he defended Hungary's sovereignty in a highly confrontational manner (Deak, 2013, p. 164). This strategy proved relatively effective as long as the Hungarian public's democratic sensitivities and expectations regarding the EU remained low. The population largely viewed the EU not as a union of shared values ensuring democratic and civil rights but rather as a source of economic benefits, most notably, subsidies (Göncz, 2012). Previous governments and the broader political class had also primarily framed their pro-European stance in economic terms. Consequently, the Fidesz government's official narrative, which portrayed these conflicts as a defense of national interests while dismissing and rejecting criticisms related to democratic shortcomings, was a strategically logical choice (Deak, 2013, p. 164).

#### **4.2. Orbán's Discourses During the Parliamentary Election Periods**

Election campaigns in Hungary officially begin 50 days before the election date. Accordingly, the selected time frames for analysis are February 17–April 6, 2018, and February 12–April 3, 2022. This period is chosen because it represents the most strategic and fertile phase for party leaders to maximize their electoral appeal. The speeches delivered during these campaigns are examined through the lens of the populist discourse's "us" vs. "them" dichotomy, with a particular focus on their political psychological connotations.

Although various government figures, including the foreign minister, the minister of justice, and officials from the prime minister's office, also deliver speeches during election campaigns, their statements are not considered independent of the party leader in a populist governance structure. Therefore, this study exclusively analyzes Viktor Orbán's speeches using CDA.

##### **4.2.1. 2018 Parliamentary Elections**

Orbán's rhetoric in the 2018 parliamentary election has been covertly nurtured from historical memory, in this instance, primarily the Treaty of Trianon, which was an ongoing national trauma continuing to condition Hungarian identity and foreign policy narratives. Invoking Trianon, however, mobilized a rich reservoir of collective grievance, deployed as an admonition for perceived current-day challenges to Hungarian sovereignty and cultural continuity (Toomey,

2018, pp. 96–97; Lamour & Varga, 2020). Reminding Trianon acted not merely as a memory of lost territory in the past, but also as an exemplary of populist ideological tactics through which current-day immigration and EU integration were presented as existential threats (Toomey, 2018, p. 101). In this rendering, national existence became everything in terms of election campaign themes, validating Orbán’s characterization as savior of Hungary’s national interest and identity (Toomey, 2018, p. 102). Such conscious association of historical trauma and current-day problem-solving facilitated not only to reassert nationalist feeling, yet also to exclude political opposition as enemy forces, either in alliance with external enemies, or as disunited elites (Toomey, 2018, pp. 102–103).

“Not with the stroke of a pen, as happened one hundred years ago at Trianon; now they want us to voluntarily hand our country over to others, over a period of a few decades. They want us to hand it over to foreigners coming from other continents, who do not speak our language, and who do not respect our culture, our laws or our way of life.” (Orbán, 2018a)

Orbán’s speech at one of his campaign rallies sums up the prevailing mindset of the 2018 parliamentary elections. A close analysis of his speech reveals a clear narrative structure: the identification of an enemy, the definition of a perceived threat, and the presentation of a savior figure. The issue of migration was in the center of Orbán’s foreign policy discourse during the 2018 election campaign. Through his rhetoric, he portrayed Brussels as a bureaucratic enemy and presented George Soros as the mastermind behind perceived external threats, positioning them as existential dangers to the Hungarian people. This is consistent with Orbán’s wider illiberal shift since 2010, as national sovereignty becomes increasingly defined in terms of coming under attack from supranational institutions and global elites, enabling him to make outside threats personal for mobilization purposes (Bíró-Nagy, 2017, p. 35).

“From their point of view, we natives with our own homeland, our own culture and our own religion [...] from the perspective of people like Soros, we are individuals beyond redemption, who cannot be converted. ... We will not stand by idly while people plot to implement the Soros Plan, and if necessary, we shall deploy an increasingly strong legal arsenal” (Orbán, 2018b).

“We are not alone, and we shall fight together to contain and then stop the plan that Soros has put forward in Brussels and in the UN; and if we have enough allies – and we may indeed have enough allies – then I am sure that we will eventually succeed. Go for

it Hungary, go for it Hungarians (*Hajrá Magyarország, hajrá magyarok!*)!” (Orbán, 2018b).

Orbán effectively mobilized public opinion by highlighting the supposed threat of immigration, appealing to domestic fears, and presenting himself as the logical protector of the nation. As it has been delivered throughout this study, fear plays an important role in political psychology, particularly in populist discourse, as it allows leaders to strengthen their appeal. In this context, Orbán described migration as an “external force”, thus reinforcing the narrative that Hungary is under siege.

“We Hungarians will have a future if we remain Hungarian, if we nurture the Hungarian language, if we protect our Christian and Hungarian culture, and if we preserve our independence and Hungarian freedom” (Orbán, 2018b).

“We currently have our independence, but this isn’t like jam: it doesn’t keep on the shelf indefinitely, and it has to be defended from time to time” (Orbán, 2018b).

Orbán’s statements strategically intertwine populism and constructivist identity-building, creating a permanent sense of crisis that legitimizes his leadership and justifies Hungary’s conflicted attitude toward the EU. Orbán shapes his narrative within an “us and them” framework, in connection with a thin centered populist ideology. In this discourse, Muslim immigrants are presented as the main threat, while the EU and Brussels are held responsible for enabling this danger. By defining these external actors as enemies, he draws a clear distinction between the “pure Hungarian nation” and those perceived to be against its interests. The importance of this rhetoric becomes obvious during election periods, when such discourses serve to mobilize voters through fear and nationalist feelings. By insisting that his supporters resist the urge to leave the country’s fate in the hands of “internationalists”, Orbán strengthens the notion that Hungary’s sovereignty is threatened and further legitimizes his leadership as the sole defender of national identity and security. This strategy is part of an overall European pattern of right-wing populist politicians who have increasingly Europeanized their populism by turning the EU into an emblematic foe, fueling home-grown anti-globalism (Brubaker, 2017).

“The danger is being brought down upon us by politicians in Brussels, Berlin and Paris who want Hungary to adopt their policies: the policies that made them immigrant countries and opened the gates to the decline of Christian culture and the spread of Islam” (Orbán, 2018b).

The Muslim immigrants that Orbán presents as the real enemy are directly opposed to the values he claims to defend, most importantly his declared role as the last bastion of Christian Europe. Right-wing populist politicians are successful because they can create narratives that highlight the striking contrast between the dangerous “them” and the endangered “us”. In this context, the language of protecting national borders is often used to argue that protection of the in-group is a vital necessity. Focusing on border control is not only a sensible policy proposition, but also an effective rhetorical tool that supports the notion of existential conflict between the country and its alleged adversaries (Lamour & Varga, 2020).

“...when we decided to stop migration at Hungary’s southern borders ... we became a target of the hatred of many people and were attacked from Brussels, because we resisted their basic worldview. We rejected claims that there is nothing we can do to protect our culture, and that there are processes which politicians, the country’s leaders, are powerless to respond to... When acts of terrorism were committed in Western Europe, within a week I was already hearing statements from leaders who said that this is the dawn of an era in which we must learn to live with the reality that terrorism is here among us. ... First, we will lose control over our territory; then we will lose control over the composition of our population; then we will lose our cultural identity; then we will lose our security, and terrorism will arrive” (Orbán, 2018c).

Viktor Orbán has flooded the European media with pithy advertisements depicting Brussels as a “superstate” and denouncing it as a “European Empire” (Kömüves & Maclean, 2021). His opposition to deeper European integration is evident in his calls to remove the phrase “closer union” from the Treaty on the EU and in his proposed dissolution of the European Parliament, one of the EU’s core institutions. This mindset is in line with the populist narrative that portrays the EU as an undemocratic and corrupt organization incapable of accurately reflecting the wishes of its people (Csehi & Zgut, 2021, p. 3).

“We do not need to fight the anemic little opposition parties, but an international network which is organized into an empire. We are up against media outlets maintained by foreign concerns and domestic oligarchs, professional hired activists, troublemaking protest organizers, and a chain of NGOs financed by an international speculator, summed up by and embodied in the name George Soros” (Orbán, 2018a).

“Hungary is performing better today because “we have not allowed the freedom of decision-making to be taken away from us. ... if the ones deciding on important national decisions are not us, but Brussels or the IMF, then we will be in trouble” (Orbán, 2018d).

CDA highlights that in many cases, what is not said can be as important as the words spoken. Populist politicians often use fear as a covered rhetorical tool to win over voters by arguing that any change in leadership will lead to instability or disaster. From the political psychology perspective, those who are afraid are more likely to prefer to maintain the status quo than to pursue political change (Hatemi et al., 2013; Morisi et al., 2021). In this case, Orbán intentionally uses this kind of veiled language to stimulate a sense of unrest in the population and strengthen the idea that his leadership is essential to the stability and security of the country.

In Orbán’s discourse, it is clear that he portrays himself as the savior of the nation. He places immigration at the center of his discourse, framing it as a fundamental threat while presenting himself as the protector of his “nation” against so-called “predators”.

“Migration is a mistake that can only be committed once, and which cannot be corrected; this is the most exciting and at the same time the most alarming thing which will be at stake at the 8 April elections. ... We and I will go to battle with anyone to protect Hungary” (Orbán, 2018e).

General or parliamentary elections serve as platforms for making populist critical speeches, especially against external actors such as Brussels. From this perspective, Orbán’s rhetoric during electoral periods is not only a tool for domestic political mobilization but is also closely intertwined with the formulation and execution of foreign policy. Orbán’s perspective on Europe shapes both his foreign policy discourse and his rhetoric during election periods, when he can most effectively mobilize public opinion and gain its support. In essence, anti-European sentiment forms the basis of Orbán’s populist foreign policy, which in turn serves as a tool for domestic politics. Opposition to the EU is not limited to criticizing Europe or, more specifically, Brussels; it also plays a strategic role in Orbán’s competition with opposition parties, a topic beyond the scope of this study. Opposition candidates are often portrayed as incapable of protecting Hungary’s interests against external threats. Orbán’s rhetoric aims to influence public sentiment, perceptions, and political orientations during election campaigns by arousing fears.

“Over the last 30 years we have fought many great battles...but our biggest battle is about to begin...there are national and democratic forces on the one side and international, anti-democratic forces on the other. ...Now is not the time for the

governing parties to pick a fight with the anemic opposition parties but to protect Hungary from those international interests, like the Soros empire, that work against Hungary's national interests.” (Orbán, 2018f)

Populist leaders tend to support each other's policies, which reinforce their shared ideological positions. This pattern is also evident in the case of Hungary. Prime Minister Orbán constructs his rhetoric against European leaders who defend the immigration policies, while at the same time developing strong relationships with leaders of other countries who share his anti-immigration stance. Through collaboration with other European nationalist and populist leaders, Orbán contributes to an interlocking web in which the leaders mutually support and legitimize one another's undertakings by referencing each other's foreign allies (Buzogány & Varga, 2023; Pirro & van Kessel, 2017).

“...The countries of the Visegrád Four are unwavering. The Orthodox world stands firm, and it seems that Croatia has come to its senses. Austria has now turned in the direction of patriotism and Christianity. In Bavaria spiritual and political resistance has developed under the leadership of the CSU<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps it is not too late. And we await, we keenly anticipate, the result of the Italian election, and with it the turning-point which will see the return to government of common sense, Italian national and cultural identity – and Silvio Berlusconi. Forza Italia!” (Orbán, 2018g).

In general, the 2018 election campaigns were conducted within a securitization framework from an international relations perspective, and Orbán's rhetoric was shaped accordingly. Security is a sensitive issue for citizens, and when faced with the idea that only the current strong government can protect them from the “evil other”, they are hesitant to vote for change. This reinforces a clear “us vs. them” dynamic in which Hungarians are positioned against external threats. Although Orbán uses securitizing language in his rhetoric, his campaign strategy primarily frames the election as a battle between “us” and “them”. Therefore, a populist discourse, rather than securitization, provides a more effective analytical framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying the election discourse.

#### **4.2.2. 2022 Parliamentary Elections**

Orbán's rhetoric in the 2022 parliamentary election was significantly influenced by two large-scale external developments: the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, and the outbreak of the

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<sup>20</sup>The Christian Social Union in Bavaria is a Christian democratic and conservative political party in Germany.

Russo-Ukrainian war. Both influenced public rhetoric, reframing voter concerns surrounding security, sovereignty, and financial stability. Orbán used the events to position the election as an existential one for either peace, symbolized by his governance, or instability, which is tied to the opposition (Scheppelle, 2022; Bradford & Cullen, 2022).

“There has never been a higher-stakes election in Hungary, at least in the last thirty years, since I have been observing elections. Elections have always been important, but deciding on issues like being dragged into a war or facing an energy embargo that threatens a total economic shutdown is unprecedented. So, we really need to pull ourselves together. I urge every listener to grasp the seriousness of the situation, recognize the horrors and atrocities of war, understand the consequences threatening Hungary, stand up for our country, protect Hungary, and vote for peace” (Orbán, 2022a).

This election period was based on the newly erupted Russia-Ukraine war, and fight against the communist threat. Orbán draw himself again as the savior of the nation as long as him and his party are in the power. Not only through the speeches but also through the emails were sent by the Government Information Center (*Kormányzati Tájékoztatási Központ*), he delivered his comfort messages to the people who live in Hungary.

“We play with open cards, and we have never hidden the fact that we see Brussels’ strategy as flawed and consider sanctions against Russia to be a dead end. I am convinced that without economic cooperation with Russia, Europe will remain anemic and lethargic. ... For the fourth time since 2010, they want to sell us the tale of a changed and renewed, united and reorganized left. I am sure that the stomachs of Hungarians will not take this even for the fourth time. I confess, I hope that no matter how tenacious the class-fighting communists are, no matter how advanced their clone technology is, if we defeat them now, they won’t be able to produce enough MiniFeri<sup>21</sup> to be able to step into the barrier once again” (Orbán, 2022b).

A similar pattern was observed in the 2022 election period, when the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war posed a threat of a new wave of migration in neighboring countries. During this period, Prime Minister Orbán took a different stance towards Ukrainian refugees seeking

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<sup>21</sup> Gyurcsány Show, also known as Mini Feri, videos, the essence of which is to set up Péter Márki-Zay as Ferenc Gyurcsány’s puppet. <https://index.hu/belfold/2023/08/11/gyurcsany-ferenc-filep-david-megafon-kormany-media-hirdetes/> The posters depict Ferenc Gyurcsány and Péter Márki-Zay together, the left’s joint prime ministerial candidate is referred to as “mini Feri”, and the appearance of the two left-wing politicians is reminiscent of the main villains of the popular Austin Powers films. <https://mindenszo.hu/mini-feri-fetrengve-rohog-egesz-magyarorszag-maki-zajon-megjelentek-rola-a-legjobb-plakatok-orszagszerte/>

asylum in Hungary. He took pride in allowing all Ukrainian refugees to enter the country and seek asylum. This approach fits with Orbán's broader narrative of Hungary as the last Christian stronghold in Europe. While consistently opposing the entry of non-Christian refugees, he openly welcomed Christian refugees fleeing the war. His distinction among Ukrainian refugees and previously, primarily Muslim migrants demonstrate selective humanitarian rhetoric featured in populist strategy. While Orbán explained this distinction in terms of simplistic geography and culture, so too does it demonstrate underlying ethno-nationalist undertows in his political agendas. In prioritizing Hungary as such a neighborhood and protector only for Christian asylum seekers, he reaffirmed an argument strongly tying national identification to corpuscular religiosity and homogeneity (Pepinsky et al., 2024, p. 992). This perspective can be critically examined from a humanitarian perspective and within the framework of international law. However, since this study does not focus on these aspects, I leave this issue open to readers' interpretation and further academic research.

"We let everyone in. I have also seen people who do not have travel documents, we also provide them with travel documents, and we also allow people from third countries to enter after the appropriate screenings. ... Whoever enters the territory of Hungary comes under Hungarian jurisdiction, we act according to Hungarian legislation. That's why we will help everyone" (Orbán, 2022c).

"You don't even have to be a nuclear scientist to distinguish between the influx of masses coming from distant Muslim worlds towards Europe in hopes of a better life and helping Ukrainians fleeing to Hungary because of the Ukrainian Russian war. So, anyone who doesn't see this difference, I think, doesn't see anything about international politics. So those who come from far away come through quite a few safe third countries, they have to be cared for there and they have to be helped there. But where should poor Ukrainians go? Well, we are their neighbors! So, in this case, the rule is that all refugees who come from the neighborhood must be helped, because there is a war there. ... This is an elementary, human, Christian life instinct. And we act accordingly, those who come from Ukraine can be sure that they will be welcomed here by friends. Hungary is a friend of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people ... we will give them all the help we can" (Orbán, 2022d).

During the 2022 elections, the "we" in Orbán's rhetoric referred to Christians, while "they" were non-Christians. However, the opposition—often labeled as "the left" by Orbán—was not associated with non-Christians but was portrayed as a group that disregarded the interests and



security of Hungary and its people. Apart from that, all foreign policy decisions taken by the Prime Minister were justified as being in the best interest of the nation.

“...if a decision has to be made, which decision is the one that best serves Hungarian interests, because Hungary’s interests come first, Hungary before everything, so what decisions should we make in order to be able to stay out of this conflict and not be nor sanctions, as a result of which, in the end, even if we stay out of the war, they will pay the price with us” (Orbán, 2022d).

“...it is not allowed that the aspects of the campaign come before the national interests. Even one bad sentence can cause trouble. In a war situation, speech is half an action. The opposition wants to send weapons that will be used to shoot at the Russians, or soldiers that will fight against the Russians. This proves that they have no routine, no knowledge and no sense of responsibility. With their irresponsible statements, they only add fuel to the fire, and this is against the interests of Hungary. Instead of adventure politics, responsible politics, security and stability are needed” (Orbán, 2022e).

Orbán has also addressed foreign policy decisions, particularly in the economic sphere, based on his rhetoric surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian war. Despite facing criticism for democratic backsliding and Hungary’s deteriorating international reputation, securing financial liquidity has remained a major challenge for the Fidesz leadership. Ironically, Orbán has fallen victim to his own rhetoric, as institutions previously blamed for Hungary’s economic difficulties, such as the IMF, have become inaccessible as potential financial partners. In response, the government has launched its “Eastern Winds” campaign, aimed at attracting investment and securing loans from non-Western countries. Although similar economic outreach had been pursued under previous Socialist governments, it lacked a Euroskeptic framework and was not directly linked to debt management. Orbán’s diplomatic and financial opening to Eastern partners, colloquially referred to as Hungary’s “Opening to the East” strategy, became politicized in terms of an articulation of opposition to Western centrism in international relations. Domestically, however, the strategy was articulated as pragmatic adjustment to declining Western hegemony and increasing multipolarity, thereby justifying Hungary’s strategic collaboration with non-Western actors like China, Russia and Türkiye. This initiative was also controversial at home and abroad for making Hungary increasingly dependent politically and economically on authoritarian regimes (Tarrósy et al., 2024, pp. 63–65). Orbán integrated this strategy with broader narratives about the “decline of the West” the “crisis of capitalist consumer societies” and the need to forge new global partnerships. This was also a relatively large reversal in some specific cases,

such as China, where Fidesz had been one of the most relentless supporters of the “free Tibet” policy until 2009. While Russia was clearly involved in this policy, relations with other potential creditors from the Gulf and the Far East appeared to have intensified (Deak, 2013, p. 166).

“There is a change of position at the top of the world. As things stand today, China will soon become the world’s most powerful economic and military power. America is in decline, while China is getting stronger. Hungary, with a population of ten million, has to maneuver skillfully in such a period. We are in alliance with the West, but we also want to establish a beneficial relationship with the emerging new great power. This is a complicated task bordering on art for policy makers” (Orbán, 2022e).

“There are two such markets: one is the Balkans and the other is China. We need to target these areas. Let’s not forget that our trade turnover with the states to the east of us increased by 28 percent in ten years, and the investment volume from the eastern countries reached 60 percent. Right, the largest Hungarian capital investment is also in South Korea, these three billion, and what is being prepared also comes from the East, not only by coming from there, but also by buying the Western ones...” (Orbán, 2022f).

This makes it clear that decisions about foreign policy and economic policy are closely linked. A government’s ability to stimulate the economy can have a major impact on voter behavior, as economic stability and growth often result in increased electoral support. In this case, gaining funds and investment through foreign policy efforts benefits the economy and increases the political legitimacy and voter appeal of the ruling party.

Orbán aimed to rally the people around the flag by portraying the election as a matter of national existence. His implicit message was that the country would face existential dangers if the current government were not supported. This discourse is compatible with a constructivist perspective because it fosters national identity and public opinion. From a political psychological perspective, it also shows how populist politicians continue to win elections despite serious criticism from the international community. By creating a sense of urgency and fear, they secure continued support and increase voter loyalty.

“Normally, an election should only be about good governance, yet we see it as a matter of national existence, as there is a danger that another generation of communists will return” (Orbán, 2022e).

“...there will be an election, it will give us all a task, but it will be a special election, an election determined by the mood of the war going on next door, where enthusiasm is important, but common sense is perhaps even more important, which, however, this war has direct effects on your lives, and this requires that the government can devote only a part of its forces to the campaign, and to ward off these bad effects, we must devote most of the government’s strength and energy, even during the most intense period of the campaign” (Orbán, 2022g).

Communism has also played a major role in Viktor Orbán’s election campaign. He framed Brussels as the “dangerous other”, portraying it as a force trying to restore leftist power in Hungary and drag the country back to the “dark age” before Fidesz. Populist leaders use historical fears to manipulate voters more effectively by evoking past national traumas (Ariboğan, 2020). The greater the fear of a return to a period of perceived instability, the stronger the inclination to maintain the status quo. In this narrative, the left is equated with the “other” and is portrayed as controlled and directed by foreign powers. Orbán’s anti-communist rhetoric in the 2022 election is an influential form of framing in history, correlating current left-wing opposition to Hungary’s repressive communist history. In countries with recent authoritarian experiences, such rhetorical tactics prove extremely potent, as they invoke collective trauma and memory to secure right-wing political support. Framing current political rivals as followers of communist ideas, Orbán manages to polarize the public along historical and ideological dimensions (Hernandez & Campbell, 2023, pp. 5–8; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, pp. 41–43).

“...we will not let them drag our country back into the left-wing nightmare from which we rescued it twelve years ago. We sent a message: we will not allow Hungary to go bankrupt again. ... We sent the message that we here on the right are not pious losers who are afraid of the influential international media behind the left, the bureaucrats in Brussels or the rich George Soros. We said we would fight” (Orbán, 2022h).

At the same time, Orbán conveyed the covered message that voting for the opposition would ultimately result in Hungary being drawn into the conflict, by pointing out that left-wing parties were planning to disrupt the country’s peace by making decisions that could lead to war. This veiled threat also consolidated his strategy of portraying himself as Hungary’s one protector of national stability and security and further mobilized citizens through threat-driven rhetoric. From a political psychology standpoint, Orbán’s rhetoric successfully exploits citizens’ greater sensitivity toward threat, particularly during periods of uncertainty. It has been demonstrated

through this research that perceived threat increases citizens' openness to security-prioritizing messages and an appetite for firm, protective governance. Such mobilization at the psychological level maximizes political loyalty and reinforces cohesion, most strongly among risk-averse citizens in periods of crisis (Hatemi et al., 2013, pp. 281–284).

“The left has lost its sanity and would lurch madly into a cruel, protracted and bloody war. The left wants to send Hungarian soldiers and Hungarian weapons to the front line. We will not allow this. We will not let the left drag Hungary into this war! We will not let the left turn Hungary into a military target, make Hungarians here and in Transcarpathia a target! We Hungarians know very well who used to pocket the profits of such wars. We are strong enough to resist the plans of the left and the warmongers behind them” (Orbán, 2022h).

“People want peace, the national side is the guarantee of peace, I think the left poses a risk to our peace and security, and this is such a powerful issue that it has pushed everything else into the background” (Orbán, 2022i).

Orbán's message is very important to the Hungarian people. It gives them a sense of security because it comes from a leader who has been already in power for many years, and people have already witnessed how they are governed. By expressing his belief that “as long as we are here, you will remain peaceful”, Orbán strengthens his reputation as a stabilizing influence and appeals to the people's need for continuity and security.

“We have come a long way, and a lot of people have joined us, the country stands by us. We must and will win this election. We will win, and then there will be peace, security and tranquility in Hungary. Today we kept the advice, now we turn into the finish line. ... So, let's go and win the most important battle of our lives! Let's give them what they deserve and protect Hungary! We Hungarians are together, not for anyone else, but for each other” (Orbán, 2022h).

#### **4.3. Analysis of Viktor Orbán's Election Discourses**

When Fidesz occupied the xenophobic nationalist right position, Jobbik presented an increasingly centrist vision (Hyttinen & Näre, 2017). When party leader Gábor Vona reacted to Orbán's Fidesz embracing xenophobic rhetoric, Jobbik moved away from racist rhetoric in a top-down process. Fidesz's rhetoric was visible throughout the country during elections in spring 2018. Billboards were filled with government-sponsored ads against immigration with a simple message: STOP. One of the distrusted figures was the Jewish-Hungarian millionaire

George Soros: Othering meaning-making constituted the national us, unlike the Soros army or team (Palonen, 2018, p. 317).

Orbán consistently frames his discourse around a classic populist dichotomy: “we” (the Hungarian people) and “them” (external powers such as Brussels, George Soros, and international organizations). This dichotomy serves to unite people against a common enemy, to strengthen a collective identity based on Hungarian nationalism and Christian values that follow the constructivist mindset of identity building. This constructivist stress highlights in which ways Orbán actively constructs non-static but mobilizable identity boundaries in political moments of need, reaffirming the notion of identity as a politically instrumental and socially constructed category (Illés et al., 2018, p. 802). On the other hand, immigration is presented as an existential threat not only to Hungary’s cultural identity but also to its security and economic stability. By framing immigration, Orbán positions himself as the savior of the nation, the man who can defend Hungary from the chaos due to the weak immigration policies of Western Europe.

Orbán’s speeches are not just about local politics; they also influence Hungary’s position in international affairs. He claims that Hungary’s elections have a direct impact on European politics, especially on issues like migrant resettlement quotas. In line with the neorealist perspective, by signaling that his own identity will influence European Council decisions, he links domestic political choices to broader European outcomes, thus extending the influence of Hungarian domestic politics to the European arena.

Orbán often uses fear as a psychological tool to gain public support and mobilize them. In his speeches, he refers to the dangers of losing Hungarian culture, weakening national sovereignty, and facing economic collapse. He blames these threats on foreign influences and their local supporters. By portraying immigrants as a threat to Hungarian culture and security, Orbán is triggering concerns about the survival of Hungarian identity. It serves not only to rally his political support but also to the justification of growing authoritarian policies under the excuse of national security. Orbán’s rhetoric portrays Hungary as constantly under threat from both internal and external enemies. It causes a siege mentality among the electorate and justifies the need for a strong leader. The psychological effects of this discourse extend beyond Hungary and shape how other nations perceive and interact with Hungary on the international stage. This fits with political psychology research that long-term exposure to perceived threat produces siege mentality, with increased in-group solidarity, suspicion of out-groups, and acceptance of authoritarian leadership (Bar-Tal, 2000, pp. 352–354).

Ahead of the 2022 elections, Orbán has frequently criticized international organizations such as the EU and the IMF from a neoclassical realist perspective. This captures neoclassical realism's assertion that domestic political actors process international structural pressures through notions of national interest and ideological objectives, applying foreign policy as an instrument to further internal political consolidation (Ripsman et al., 2016). In his statements, he described these international organizations as disconnected from Hungary's interests and values. For example, he defined Brussels' sanctions against Russia and its migration policies as harmful to Hungary. Orbán emphasizes that Hungary should rely on its own resources rather than seek aid from the EU or other international institutions. He voices this view while criticizing the EU's response to the energy crisis and argues that Hungary should solve its problems on its own.

It should also be noted that, despite portraying Hungary as a Christian fortress in Europe, Orbán's foreign policy is pragmatically influenced by Turanism<sup>22</sup>, which transcends religious boundaries. Hungary has announced its intention to strengthen connections with Turkic countries, regardless of religious affiliation, by establishing an Organization of Turkic States (OTS) Representative Office in Budapest, along with increased diplomatic relations (Egeresi, 2023, p. 69). This practical strategy demonstrates Orbán's capacity to combine strategic foreign policy goals with nationalist rhetoric and aligns Hungary with both non-European and Euro-Atlantic countries.

Orbán portrays left-wing parties as being in the same league as foreign powers and refers to them as a threat to national unity and security. His rhetoric often refers to shared national values and identity, positioning Fidesz as the party that will protect Hungary's peace, security, and Christian heritage. He separates Hungarians from perceived enemies by making a clear distinction between "us and them". He portrays the Hungarian left as a force that is in conflict with national interests by collaborating with foreign powers and claims that they will drag Hungary into dangerous conflicts. Conversely, he describes himself and Fidesz as a force that protects Hungarian sovereignty and stability against these internal and external threats. Orbán's approach of refugees from Ukraine is more selective and divisive towards refugees from Muslim-majority countries. His attitude towards Ukrainian refugees includes the use of discourse that prioritizes Hungary's national interests and values, unlike other groups. Overall,

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<sup>22</sup> Hungarian Turanism is a diverse Turanist phenomenon that revolves around identifying or associating Hungarian history and people with the history and people of Central Asia, Inner Asia, or the Ural region. It encompasses many different understandings and has served as a guiding principle for many political movements. It was at its most vibrant in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Orbán's discourses reflect a complex interplay of populist appeals, nationalist rhetoric, and strategic maneuvers in international relations.

Orbán's rhetoric shows how populist rhetoric shapes not only domestic politics but also international policies and alliances. His speeches reveal the effects of populist rhetoric that goes beyond national borders by manipulating local perceptions and aligning them with broader global strategies. In this regard, it demonstrates how the populist discourse used in domestic politics can affect global politics and thereby interactions between states.

## CHAPTER 5. TURKISH CASE

### 5.1. Rising Right-wing Populism in Türkiye

#### 5.1.1. Historical Background

In Turkish, populism appears in two forms: “peopleism (*halkçılık*)” and “populism (*popülizm*)” (Çay & Deregözü, 2022). The former played a central role in the intellectual discourse of the Second Constitutional Era<sup>23</sup> and the single-party period<sup>24</sup> (1923-46). In Turkish literature, it has a largely positive connotation, with the emphasis on the education and enlightenment of the people as primary goals. On the other hand, the second form carries negative connotations and expresses opposition to the “Western-liberal democratic system” (Baykan, 2017). Populism, one of the fundamental principles and six pillars of the Kemalist ideology<sup>25</sup>, was officially incorporated into the Turkish constitution in 1937. However, its roots date back to the Second Constitutional Era of the Ottoman Empire. The intellectuals of that period, Yusuf Akçura<sup>26</sup>, Ahmet Ağaoğlu<sup>27</sup> and Hüseyinzade Ali<sup>28</sup>, shaped Turkish populism under the influence of the Russian Narodniki, but the interpretations of this concept changed during and after the single-party period. Despite the widespread idea that Turkish populism is a flexible and unchangeable concept, it has been constantly renewed, adapting to and reflecting the economic and social conditions of the relevant periods.

The lack of consensus in the literature on the concept of populism leads to the perception that any political idea that emphasizes public participation is labeled as populism. This blurs the distinction between populism, which can be both inclusive and exclusive, claiming to be the “sole representative of the people” or even “the people themselves”, and “peopleists” (*halkçılar*), who prioritize the people’s interests in their politics and seek a transformation in favor of the people. Furthermore, despite the possibility that the two terms are coded separately in Turkish, the distinction between the two concepts is reduced when translation problems arise due to the use of the same English term for both. Those who experienced this confusion in

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<sup>23</sup> The period of restored parliamentary rule in the Ottoman Empire between the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and the 1920 dissolution of the General Assembly, during the empire’s twilight years.

<sup>24</sup> The single-party period in Türkiye began with the declaration of the republic on October 29, 1923. Except for short intervals, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) was the only legal political party between 1923 and 1945, until the National Development Party (MKP) was founded.

<sup>25</sup> Kemalism or Atatürkism is a political ideology based on the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of the Republic of Türkiye.

<sup>26</sup> He was one of the leading representatives of the Turkism movement. He is a Tatar Turk.

<sup>27</sup> Azerbaijani-born Turkish politician, lawyer, writer and journalist. He was the founder of liberal Kemalism.

<sup>28</sup> He was one of the pioneer intellectuals of Turkism and Turanism. His views were influential in his homeland Azerbaijan, Türkiye and other Turkish societies. He is the person who instilled the idea of Turkism in Ziya Gökalp.



Türkiye were the *peopleists*, who emerged after the Second Constitutional Era and developed their ideas during the Republican period. Despite numerous institutional, conceptual, instrumental, and goal-oriented differences from populists, Ottoman-Turkish *peopleists* were erroneously labeled as populists by ignoring these distinctions (Yılmaz, 2022).

At this point, it is worth to explain the founder leader of Republic of Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk<sup>29</sup>'s populism. One of the principles of Atatürk is populism and it comprehends a different understanding what has been standing after his decease and until today. The distinction between populism and Atatürk's populism is related to the scope of the definition of people or nation. Indeed, the definition of Turkishness in Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution<sup>30</sup> was shaped around this comprehensiveness and accepted all of the people of Türkiye as Turks regardless of their religion and race. Because Atatürk and the founding cadre were afraid not only of class separation but also of any ethnic or religious social separation that would lead to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Tracks of this can be seen in the route Atatürk drew for the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) at the 1935 Congress: "*The fundamental idea and desire of the Republican People's Party is to protect citizens from all kinds of differences and to make them useful to themselves and the great Turkish nation.*" (Republican People's Party, 1935, pp. 6-7).

Another distinction between Atatürk's understanding of populism can be resonated to the Laclauian approach. Accordingly, populism, which turns politics into a scene of conflict, aims to mobilize those who suffer from social exclusion by destroying the status quo. According to this, the aim of this mobilization is to achieve radical democracy. Because, according to the Laclauian approach, liberal democracy, which is inherently exclusionary, is the problem itself (2007, pp. 88-95). However, Atatürk's ultimate understanding is to achieve inclusive liberal democracy with a definition of charity that is inclusive, not exclusive. The legacy of Ziya Gökalp<sup>31</sup> is the idea that a liberal democracy based on division of labor can be established, with no losers.

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<sup>29</sup> The name Mustafa was not written on the two identity cards issued in 1934 and 1935 (Adoption of the Surname Law No. 2525 dated 21 June 1934).

<sup>30</sup> It is the constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, which was accepted on April 20, 1924, and came into force on May 25, 1924, replacing the 1921 Constitution. It remained in force until 1961 with several important changes, such as the addition of the six principles, also known as Atatürk's principles, the removal of the statement that the state's religion was Islam and granting women the right to elect and be elected as deputies.

<sup>31</sup> He was a Turkish writer, sociologist, poet and politician. He served as a member of parliament in the Meclis-i Mebusan and the Turkish Grand National Assembly. He is also known as the "father of Turkish nationalism".

Finally, the role that Atatürk gave to the intellectuals is also noteworthy. Because populists code their positions in favor of the people by establishing a contrast between “corrupt elites” and “pure, clean and naive people” (Mudde et al., 2019, pp. 15-16). In this conflict, although it is unclear who the two concepts cover, that is, even if they are “empty signifiers”, since it is based on the logic of “exposing the elites”, opposition intellectuals and economic elites are usually the targets depending on which ideology populism is affiliated with. Accordingly, the “elites”, whose identity is never fully understood and who are claimed to be against the will of the people, are depicted as a homogeneous group (Weyland, 2001). However, while Atatürk undertakes a transformative role in society, he positions himself on the side of the intellectuals, not the people (Yılmaz, 2022, p. 163).

Populism during the single-party system in Türkiye was primarily an elitist, hierarchical, bureaucratic, anti-liberal and anti-democratic discourse. The slogan “despite the people, for the people”<sup>32</sup> reflects the nature of the populist discourse of that period (Karaömerlioğlu, 2021). Moreover, this is not the first time Türkiye has encountered populism. If we leave aside the relationship between the “populism” of the Republican People’s Party in the single-party regime of the 1920s and 1930s and peopleism; populism, together with its religious version, has had a significant impact on Turkish politics since the 1950s, following the transition to a multi-party system<sup>33</sup>. Populism was one of the factors that brought the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP)<sup>34</sup> to power in the 1950s and kept it in power. In fact, the Republican People’s Party also pursued populist policies in the second half of the 1940s, but it was not as successful as the DP that came after it. In this context, Süleyman Demirel<sup>35</sup>’s right-wing policies in the 1970s should also be mentioned, which emphasized the “threat of communism” on the one hand and religious themes on the other, and Bülent Ecevit<sup>36</sup>’s slightly leftist discourse, which he embodied by

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<sup>32</sup> Jacobinism - Kemalism in its original form in Türkiye. Against the possibility of the re-establishment of tyranny and for the liberation of the people, Jacobinism sees the adoption of a method embodied in the expression “despite the people and for the people” as necessary for the revolution to achieve its goals.

<sup>33</sup> The multi-party era in Türkiye began in 1945 when a second party, the National Development Party (MKP) led by Nuri Demirağ, was founded in addition to the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and went to the 1946 general elections with a multi-party system. Multi-party life in the Republic had begun with the Progressive Republican Party (TCF; 1924-25) and the Free Republican Party (SCF; 1930), but these parties had very short lives.

<sup>34</sup> It is known as the Turkish political party that was founded on January 7, 1946, was in the minority in the elections held the year it was founded and ended the 27-year single-party period in the elections held 4 years later (May 14, 1950). It won the elections of 1950, 1954 and 1957 respectively and was in power for 10 years. The Democrat Party was overthrown by the military coup of May 27, 1960, and was closed on September 29, 1960.

<sup>35</sup> He is the politician who has formed the most governments, with seven governments formed in the period after Türkiye’s transition to a multi-party system in 1946, and the longest-serving prime minister in Turkish political history after İsmet İnönü and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

<sup>36</sup> During his political career, he formed five governments, three of which were coalition governments, and served as Prime Minister of Türkiye in 1974, 1977, 1978-1979 and 1999-2002.

emphasizing populism. However, the person who used religious populism most effectively in politics during the same period was Necmettin Erbakan<sup>37</sup>. The “new” aspect of populism in terms of Turkish political life is that it has been referred to for the first time in recent years, along with the authoritarianism of Türkiye (Erdoğan, 2019).

The DP’s experience in Türkiye shared another common characteristic of contemporary populism—continuous attacks on existing institutions. Through its discourse and actions, the DP contributed to a political atmosphere marked by significant polarization in the late 1950s. By establishing a political organization called Fatherland Fronts (*Vatan Cephesi*), the DP utilized state resources, including the radio, the primary mass communication tool in Türkiye at the time, to support this organization. This significantly contributed to the polarization of the country. The deeply polarized state, in turn, provided justification for some young military officers to stage a coup in 1960. If not for the DP’s populism laying the groundwork for chaos, crisis, instability, and polarization, the infamous coup might have been averted (Karaömerlioğlu, 2021, p. 84).

Due to two significant social upheavals—an impactful earthquake in 1999 and a profound economic crisis in 2001—Türkiye experienced a radical shift in political psychology. This shift led to the near disappearance of existing mainstream parties in the 2002 elections, paving the way for the Islamist party, led by Erdoğan, to assume power. In its early years, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) appeared to be a reformist party striving to expand political and personal freedoms. The party was actively engaged in meeting the membership requirements of the EU, which primarily focused on advancing liberal values, especially in terms of the rule of law. Many observers, both within Türkiye and internationally, perceived this period as one marked by liberal reforms. It seemed as though the AKP, originating from the social and cultural periphery with its Islamist roots, could align well with liberal democratic values and politics. During these years, despite holding government and parliamentary control, the party operated within a system of checks and balances sustained by various state institutions, with the military acting as a dominant force in Turkish politics since 1960 (Karaömerlioğlu, 2021).

Erdoğan’s AKP, stands as one of the earliest and most prominent examples of a political genre that gradually began to dominate the global political landscape in the 2010s. Erdoğan’s vision

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<sup>37</sup> He is a Turkish mechanical engineer, academic, politician and founder of the National Vision ideology. He served as deputy prime minister and prime minister. In 1974, he became deputy prime minister and state minister in the coalition government established with the Republican People’s Party led by Bülent Ecevit.

of the “New Türkiye” shares significant similarities with populist regimes led by figures such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, and many others. Understanding contemporary Türkiye provides valuable insights into a form of populism, perhaps more aptly termed neo-populism, which can be characterized as the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of our time (Karaömerlioğlu, 2021, p. 84). Starting in 2011, it became increasingly evident that the AKP sought to reshape the traditional political power structure in Türkiye, with the ultimate goal of establishing a more authoritarian rule (Çalışkan, 2018). This transformation was marked by a shift toward a one-man regime, characterized by an anti-democratic discourse and oppressive practices.

Until the April 2017 constitutional referendum, it was not clear exactly what kind of political regime the authoritarianism process that Türkiye had been experiencing under the AKP government since 2011 would evolve into. With the full entry into force of the 2017 constitutional amendments following the June 24, 2018, elections, the picture has become clear: The AKP has established a presidential authoritarian regime in Türkiye supported by religious-nationalist populism (Erdoğan, 2019).

Although the founders of the AKP initially promised to stay away from populism and provide realistic solutions to Türkiye’s problems (Özdemir, 2015), they went back on their word after coming to power. Similarly, the founders of the AKP stated that they had taken off the “shirt of national opinion” and had not kept their promise that they would not pursue a policy based on the political use of religion. Especially after a period starting in 2011, the AKP and its leader Erdoğan seem to have decided on an authoritarian political understanding and practice supported by religious populism (Erdoğan, 2019).

In Erdoğan’s discourses, the concept of the people is often interpreted as the nation (*millet*). However, here the concept of the nation is not used as an expression of a nationalist ideology, but as a way of establishing group unity (Laclau, 2007, p. 91). Because populism is the founder of the concept of the people as an organic unity with an essential identity (Ateş, 2017, p. 110). The expressions “one nation, one state, one flag, one homeland” and “my nation” that Erdoğan uses in almost every rally should be evaluated in this context. Erdoğan has described the nation as a homogeneous and organic community in his election speeches. Erdoğan, who shapes the nation according to the image of a religious-national community, also frames the public sphere with religious-cultural boundaries (Ateş, 2017, p. 121). This determination is also significant in terms of showing that right-wing populism is constructed on the axis of identity politics (Sırma & Parlak, 2020).

### 5.1.2. Erdoğan's Leadership and Policy Making

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is undoubtedly the most controversial figure in recent Turkish political history, and his political dominance is incomparable even by Turkish standards. His influence is so profound that it would be inadequate to attempt to explain Türkiye's recent foreign policy outcomes without considering Erdoğan's leadership. Given his considerable authority and the fact that he has effectively reshaped much of the country's internal balance, his role in shaping foreign policy cannot be ignored (Görener & Ucal, 2011). Considering Erdoğan's life story, personality traits and similar elements in the context of his leadership, the scope of the study can be significantly expanded. Therefore, instead of delving into these topics that are more suitable for leadership studies, it would be more appropriate to leave an open space for future research. This study will focus on how the populist ideological framework is shaped in Erdoğan's foreign policy discourses and examine how these discourses function in terms of strategies to mobilize public support.

Due to his harsh words and increasingly authoritarian actions, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is regularly highlighted in the media worldwide. During his time as prime minister and then president, he was able to effectively change the political climate in Türkiye. Now he is seeking to exert an unparalleled influence in global politics. Erdoğan's rise from mayor of Istanbul to future Muslim global leader was made possible by his ability to exploit or dismantle established institutions of power when they do not suit his purposes. In the meantime, he has remained charismatic as a strong Islamist leader who acts in the best interests of the "people" and the "ummah". Erdoğan is increasingly turning into a populist authoritarian, using populist tactics and subverting democratic institutions (Yılmaz, 2021).

Since the 1970s and 1980s, when the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan led the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*), Erdoğan's worldview and narrative have always included populist elements that portrayed him and Muslim Turks as the rightful and morally superior owners of Türkiye, despite their oppression and the rejection of their collective will by the Kemalist elite. However, as Erdoğan consolidated his grip on power in the early 2010s, his populism intensified, and its anti-Western conspiratorial component strengthened (Yılmaz, 2021, p. 4).

When looking at the external dynamics that shape Erdoğan's leadership characteristics, it is possible to state that his personality has evolved in response to both domestic pressures and international challenges (Balcı & Efe, 2021). This transformation generally coincides with the characteristics of populist leadership, which adapts its personality to maximize its appeal to the

masses. The portrayal of Erdoğan's leadership, especially as a protector of the nation's sovereignty and identity, strengthens the populist discourse. Due to his modest upbringing, Erdoğan has always had the advantage of proving himself as a man of the people throughout his long political career. This is why he has separated himself from the military and political "elite" (Lowen, 2017; BBC, 2002). His followers have been inspired by his fairytale childhood story: a poor young man growing up in a poor and angry urban environment on the outskirts of the richer and more Westernized neighborhoods of Istanbul, his upward mobility and his rise to become the leader of Türkiye (Cagaptay, 2018). While others rightly criticize his populist and autocratic tendencies, others see him as the chosen "sultan" or "caliph" for the "New Türkiye" and perhaps even the Muslim world (Lowen, 2017). However, a closer look reveals that Erdoğan's political philosophy is essentially a shapeshifter; he will refrain from anything to maintain his political position, even at the cost of destroying the country's institutional framework and creating serious divisions in a multi-ethnic and religious society (Genç, 2019).

Erdoğan's *neo*-populist regime (Kaynak, 2016), akin to others, is illiberal and fundamentally opposed to various forms of pluralism. Similar to the DP's approach, it is rooted in a simplistic understanding of democracy solely centered around electoral success. The fairness of elections becomes inconsequential (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2016). More troubling is the tendency of AKP's leading politicians to reject election results if unfavorable. The 2019 mayoral elections in Istanbul, which the AKP lost, exemplify this behavior. Despite lacking evidence, Erdoğan alleged election rigging, leading to a re-election that he ultimately lost by a significant margin (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2019). The DP and the AKP shared a similar perspective on the majoritarian view of democracy. In their view, democracy is essentially limited to the electoral process. The Young Turks<sup>38</sup> and the Kemalists, on the other hand, argue against applying the majoritarian concept of democracy, as their inclination leans towards a single-party regime from the outset.

Erdoğan's political style is an important example to show how populism comes into being when it becomes a tool of right-wing governments. This style of discourse shapes the political field with tensions and hostile discourses, moving it away from the agonistic form of democracy (Sırma & Parlak, 2020). Populist governments follow a policy that divides the people into us and the others, responds authoritarily to any reaction from the other, and controls the judiciary and the media. Just like Viktor Orbán, who has been the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010,

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<sup>38</sup> It is the name given to the "young and intellectual" generation that emerged in the last period of the Ottoman Empire and were opposed to the constitutional monarchy during the reign of Abdulhamid II. (Findley, C. V., & Anadol, A. (2006). *Dünya Tarihinde Türkler*. Kitap Yayınevi.)

Erdoğan also resembles European populists with his authoritarian political style that sees all opposition as enemies and morally inferior and ignores objections from civil society. However, the most important attitude that distinguishes Erdoğan from European right-wing populists is the absence of a policy based on anti-immigration. Unlike European right-wing politics based on anti-immigration and xenophobia, Erdoğan has actually followed a policy expected from the left with his inclusive discourses towards Syrians. Another characteristic of European right-wing populist politicians is their inward-looking policies and reactive attitudes towards international organizations such as the EU. On the contrary, Erdoğan has clearly stated that he has not given up on his EU membership goals. However, he also voices harsh criticisms of the EU from time to time.<sup>39</sup> At first glance, Erdoğan's reactionary attitude towards international organizations can be likened to the attitude of right-wing populist politicians in Europe. Yet, the most important factor that encourages this reactionary attitude of populist politicians in Europe is their racist-nationalist and cultural protectionist approaches. On the other hand, Erdoğan reacts to the silence of these organizations regarding attacks on Muslims in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Palestine and the refugee problem, which brings him closer to the reactionary attitude of left-wing populists (Sirma & Parlak, 2020, p. 174).

Apart from Erdoğan's overall politics, lastly it must be noted that, the president supports his populist discourse through the gestures. From his early years, Erdoğan was known for his extraordinary ability to memorize, especially praised for his vocal modulation in terms of amplitude and frequency, a trait recognized by observers and politicians. Initially, he used minimal body movements to enhance his personal appeal and political messages. When his national leadership is analyzed, two distinct periods emerge. The first period extends from 2001, when Erdoğan founded the AKP and the party came to power in 2002, to 2011<sup>40</sup>, when political conflict increased. The second period begins in 2011 and continues to the present day, with the 2017 referendum<sup>41</sup> serving as a significant turning point. In the first phase, Erdoğan's rhetoric

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<sup>39</sup> The most typical of these criticisms is the statement "the world is bigger than five", criticizing UN policies in his speech to the UN General Assembly on 20.09.2016.

<sup>40</sup> This period can also be described as a turbulent period due to the problems arising from the change of government, the removal of six zeros from the Turkish Lira, relations with the EU, the 2008 economic crisis and finally the 2010 constitutional amendment referendum. The 2010 Turkish constitutional amendment referendum was the submission of a number of amendments to the Constitution in Türkiye to a referendum on September 12, 2010. The package, which included a twenty-six-article amendment, was submitted to a referendum by President Abdullah Gül after being approved by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. As a result of the referendum, the constitutional amendments were accepted with 57.88% yes and 42.12% no votes.

<sup>41</sup> The 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum was a referendum held on April 16, 2017. Voters voted on changes to 18 articles of the current Turkish Constitution. After a long debate on the amendments, supported by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and its founder President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the decision to pass

and body language were more cautious and focused on adapting to his colleagues while using a multi-faceted vocal approach. However, after 2011, Erdoğan transformed into a more assertive authoritarian leader, adopting confrontational rhetoric and body language (Joppien, 2020, p. 239).

## **5.2. Erdoğan's Discourses During the Parliamentary Election Periods**

As argued in the relevant section of the Hungarian case, shaping the populist narrative of the division between “us” and “them” is crucial for developing government policies. Moreover, this narrative reinforces the discursive characterization of polarized language in line with the political position of the ruling party. In the Turkish case, Erdoğan's 2018 and 2023 general election speeches are examined to understand these processes and provide an opportunity for comparative assessment with the public speeches in the previous case.

With the support of the “people”, Erdoğan has changed the fundamental structure of Turkish society. A repressive Kemalist state is giving way to an aggressively dictatorial and vindictive Islamist regime in Türkiye. Democratic checks and balances have been effectively eliminated, state institutions are propagating the populist rhetoric of Erdoğanism, and all opposition is securitized and viewed as “enemies” (Yılmaz, 2021, p. 19).

### **5.2.1. 2018 General Elections**

According to the official election calendar for the Presidential and 27<sup>th</sup> Term Parliamentary General Elections held on June 24, 2018, the election process officially began on Monday, April 30, 2018. The election campaign period began on Sunday, May 13, 2018, coinciding with the finalization of the candidate lists. On the eve of the election, a propaganda ban was implemented starting at 18:00 on June 23, 2018. This section examines all of Erdoğan's speeches published on the official presidential website in this time frame. Particular attention is drawn to the speeches analyzed within the scope of this study that explicitly address foreign policy-making processes. Leaders frequently make speeches, but their most intense, comprehensive, and at the same time compact and goal-oriented speeches occur during election periods. Therefore, the rhetoric employed before election periods actually forms the framework for the messages that will be fully conveyed during the elections themselves.

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the parliament to hold a referendum was taken with the support of the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The amendment package includes the abolition of the current parliamentary system and the introduction of a presidential system, and many changes in the legislative, executive and judicial sectors, including the elimination of the office of prime minister. The constitutional amendment proposal was first announced by the AK Party immediately after the 2011 general elections.



In this section, the President's speeches are analyzed from a political psychological perspective. His rhetoric frequently uses repetitive evocations aimed at mobilizing, influencing and securing voter support during election periods. In particular, it plays an important role in foreign policy discourse and strengthens the main hypothesis of this study: foreign policy cannot be considered in isolation from the dynamics of nation-states. Leaders shape their political narratives in a way that simultaneously affects both domestic and foreign policy.

A recurring theme in Erdoğan's rhetoric is the portrayal of terrorists, foreign powers, and anyone who opposes the "pure" Turkish nation. He frames the ballot box as the sole mechanism of democratic legitimacy (Yılmaz, 2020) and portrays his supporters as the true heirs of the nation's ancestors dating back to the Ottoman period. His rhetoric often draws on historical narratives and glorifies the past as a way to strengthen national identity and loyalty (Uzer, 2018). This strategic use of history serves as a powerful psychological tool to mobilize voters, legitimizing his political authority while fostering a sense of continuity and national pride.

"We will answer those trying to subdue us through terrorist organizations at the ballot box. And those attempting to discipline us through currency fluctuations and credit ratings will receive an Ottoman slap at the ballot box" (Erdoğan, 2018a).

During 2018 election rallies, Erdoğan has mainly given a place to the coup attempt carried out by the terrorist organization FETO<sup>42</sup> on July 15, 2016. This attempt has served as a foundational narrative for constructing populist language and reinforced the dichotomy between "us" and "them". Erdoğan strategically used the coup attempt to strengthen his political legitimacy and mobilize his voters by portraying his government and supporters as the true defenders of the nation against internal and external enemies.

"It is crucial that July 15<sup>th</sup> is not forgotten, especially by the younger generation. We must always keep alive the awareness of what actions we can and will take when the time comes, in response to these traitors and terrorists" (Erdoğan, 2018b).

There is a clear distinction in Erdoğan's discourses regarding Türkiye before and after the 2016 FETO coup attempt. Notably, despite his AKP having been in power since 2002, Erdoğan describes the pre-2016 era as part of the "Old Türkiye", indirectly distancing his leadership from past policy shortcomings. This rhetorical strategy allows him to position himself as the

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<sup>42</sup> Fethullahists Terrorist Organization. The Fethullahists are an Islamic community and intelligence organization that emerged in the late 1960s, formed by people who came together under the instigation of Fethullah Gülen.

architect of the “New Türkiye”, and supports the idea that under his leadership, a fundamental transformation has taken place in response to external and internal threats.

“I expect you to deliver a strong message at the ballot box to those nostalgic for the old Türkiye. Show them that this country no longer has any tolerance for obstruction, sabotage, crises, or the ambitions of those who seek to impose their control” (Erdoğan, 2018c).

Populist leaders use a discourse that convinces voters that their victory will lead to a prosperous future in order to mobilize and support public opinion (Betz, 2018). In line with this mindset, Erdoğan presents the struggle against July 15, 2016, coup attempt as a “war of independence” necessary to establish a “New Türkiye” and draws parallels with the Turkish War of Independence that led to the foundation of the Republic. This representation emphasizes that Türkiye has defeated external enemies and that the sense of national resilience and sovereignty has been strengthened. From a political psychology perspective, this situation shows how past national traumas are embedded in populist discourse and serve as a powerful tool to mobilize the public by reviving collective memories of struggle and survival.

“...The spirit of July 15, along with this and other epic moments in history, will hopefully continue to live on. On the morning of June 25, we will awaken to a new day.... Our country will enter a period where it will look to the future with greater confidence” (Erdoğan, 2018d).

In Erdoğan’s discourses, there is a strong connection between the past and present in combination with us vs them populist understanding. “Us” is always represent the pure people who have a same ethos with Erdoğan and his ideological way, and “them” is always the ones both internal and external traitors to the nation’s wholeness.

“In every coup, it was *us* who were imprisoned, oppressed, and suffered. *They* attacked our existence, unity, stability, prosperity, and peace. Yet, we did not falter or break; we did not take a single step back from the struggle. With virtue, determination, and courage, we lifted Türkiye to new heights” (Erdoğan, 2018e).

Erdoğan’s discourse describes internal opposition figures, who are professedly influenced by external forces with hostile intentions towards the Turkish nation, as “evil others”. Particularly, in the foreign policy discourse, the emphasis on the 2016 coup attempt being organized by external forces has played an important role in forging alliances and defining Türkiye’s relations

with the international organizations such as the EU (Usluer, 2016). By consistently contrasting “pure people” with “others”, Erdoğan effectively constructs a political narrative that fosters a sense of domestic unity in the face of perceived external threats, thereby legitimizing his policies and strengthening his support.

Through framing national security concerns in the context of foreign policy, Erdoğan has covertly identified certain foreign countries as threats to Türkiye’s national security. A key aspect of his discourse is to portray Türkiye as a country that adheres to universal international law and criticizes other actors for interpreting these laws in accordance with their own interests. Erdoğan’s foreign policy discourse often emphasizes Türkiye’s isolation or its few alliances in the international arena, creating a psychological basis for presenting himself as a “lone wolf” leader. This narrative not only supports a sense of national resilience but also serves as a populist strategy that positions Erdoğan as the sole defender of the country’s sovereignty from external pressures.

“While we exercise our rights derived from international law in a manner that is fully consistent with legal principles, the intransigent attitudes of certain countries are, of course, unacceptable. However, regardless of what they do, we have pursued our own course thus far and will continue to do so. Now, is this law their law, or is it international law?” (Erdoğan, 2018b).

Erdoğan has strategically used a language that created images of global or evil others to promote national unity and mobilize public support. He consolidated the rally around the flag effect with the slogan “one state, one nation, one flag, one homeland”, which summed up his vision of national solidarity.

“We once again declare to those who plot against our nation, our flag, our homeland, and our state: you will not succeed. The unity and integrity of our nation will always endure. Our flag will always wave in the skies. Our homeland will forever be a home to this nation. Our state will remain eternal” (Erdoğan, 2018f).

The President often describes his supporters and party’s political base as the “ummah”, a term that goes beyond Turkish national identity and reflects a broader desire to position himself as the representative of the Muslim world. This conceptualization plays an important role in shaping Türkiye’s foreign policy, aligning it with a vision that goes beyond national borders and embraces wider Islamic solidarity. Moreover, Erdoğan’s voters largely identify as religious,

confirming the consistency between his rhetoric and political strategy. Notably, his rhetoric does not actively seek to get support from individuals who do not hold religious beliefs.

“We have presented ourselves to the nation with the electoral alliance we established together with the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) and supported by the Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP). ... Now, we have the People’s Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*). We have united within this alliance because the Ummah needed it ... now is the time for unity and togetherness” (Erdoğan, 2018d).

An analysis of Erdoğan’s speeches from a foreign policy perspective reveals a strategic attempt to structure a public perception. His discourse not only lays the foundation for national unity but also directs public sentiment toward a common enemy: foreign powers acting against Türkiye. Through framing external actors as threats to the country’s existence, Erdoğan promotes the idea that his leadership and party are the sole guarantors of national security and sovereignty. From a political psychological perspective, this fear-based narrative serves to mobilize voters by creating a sense of urgency and dependence on the incumbent government.

“While global malicious actors attempt to inject terrorism and separatist ideologies into our region, Türkiye has strived with all its might to bring peace, tranquility, and security. ...we have made historic progress in securing both our own future and that of our friends. It is no longer possible to take steps contrary to Türkiye’s interests in our region. It is no longer possible to create dirty games, manipulate borders, or impose faits accomplis against Türkiye’s strong will in our geography” (Erdoğan, 2018e).

“...As long as we maintain our political stability and continue with strong political leadership, Türkiye will not only shout that ‘the world is larger than five’ but will also demonstrate to friends and foes alike that the world is indeed larger than five. Our fight against terrorism is a part of our struggle for independence” (Erdoğan, 2018e).

Presenting the leader as a hero who defends the disadvantaged is one of the most important narratives in populist politics for mobilizing voters (Alexander, 2010). In his foreign policy speeches, Erdoğan uses this image to portray himself as a defender of the Muslim population worldwide. The language used also determines the country’s place in international relations. In his speeches, the President often emphasizes solidarity with the Muslim World and advances a populist narrative that appeals to supporters with staunch religious beliefs.

“We did not merely bring attention to the massacres; we also activated mechanisms to ensure accountability. Without being deterred by the indifference of others, we became the voice of conscience and the hope of oppressed regions using our own resources. Today, we are the country that provides the most humanitarian aid in the world. We stood for mercy against oppression, mutual benefit against exploitation, and brotherhood against arrogance. We have always maintained our strong sensitivity towards our national cause, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. We defended the cause of the oppressed Palestinian people on every platform. In Davos, we stood up to the occupiers and said, ‘one minute’. That ‘one minute’ was a significant milestone” (Erdoğan, 2018e).

“The world is bigger than five ... We are seeking justice for humanity, and God willing, sooner or later, we will achieve this. Perhaps not immediately, but one day we will witness the fulfillment of the justice demands of the world’s oppressed. Until that day, our duty is to continue the struggle without interruption” (Erdoğan, 2018g).

President Erdoğan has emphasized that they opened the doors without hesitation to the millions of refugees who came to Türkiye from Syria and Iraq; “*sharing our homes and bread as a nation.*” (Erdoğan, 2018e).

“To defend Palestine and Jerusalem means to defend everything that has been good, beautiful, right, and just throughout the ancient history of humanity. ... We will pursue the Israeli administration, which writes the name of Palestine and Jerusalem alongside oppression, in both this world and the hereafter.” (Erdoğan, 2018h).

The discourse including Palestine and other oppressed Muslim countries has primarily framed within the context of the Muslim community, closely aligned with Erdoğan’s political ideology, and resounds deeply with his supporters. In Turkish politics, especially from Erdoğan’s ideological perspective, welcoming Muslim refugees has been not only a humanitarian act but also a strategic foreign policy tool (Polat, 2018). The Syrian migration crisis was initially turned into a domestic political agenda and received unwavering support from voters.

“Regardless of the cost, we will stand by justice, truth, and the oppressed until the end. For us, this stance is not situational but principled. We demonstrate the same stance regarding Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Crimea, and Nagorno-Karabakh. We have never considered the identity of the oppressed, and we will not. Despite being the 17th largest economy in the world, our leading position in humanitarian aid relative to national

income is due to this approach. The reason we have hosted 3.5 million Syrians who sought refuge in our country to save their lives and honor is this attitude. The reason we have implemented a development model in Somalia, suffering from instability and hunger, with approximately one billion dollars in support, setting an example for the world, is this humanitarian behavior” (Erdoğan, 2018i).

“The struggle of Türkiye is the struggle of all the oppressed and marginalized. Our struggle is the fight of the silent masses whose future has been stolen. Türkiye’s struggle is the struggle of the Palestinians, the Rohingya, Africans, the people of Turkestan, and the oppressed peoples of Asia. I expect you, my young brothers and sisters, to wholeheartedly defend this struggle of our nation. Without succumbing to the slanders of the treacherous FETO members and separatists, I want you to counter the propaganda against our country by spreading the truth about the real Türkiye” (Erdoğan, 2018j).

Additionally, Erdoğan refers to the Quran as “our holy book” and positions himself as a defender of oppressed people. By referring to the Quran as “our holy book”, he positions himself as its defender and protector, while at the same time covertly referring to himself and all those who accept it as their holy text. By using this rhetorical device, he is able to establish himself as a defender of Islamic principles and strengthen his reputation as a leader who defends Islam and condemns any perceived injustice against it.

“As we continue to warn Western countries about Islamophobia, Turkophobia, xenophobia, and racism, our reputation suffers. Hey, West, as you attack our holy book, know this: we will not attack your sacred things, but we will bring you down, mark my words. Who do you think you are to attack our sacred beliefs? We know just how despicable you are. You’ve done this everywhere, and you’re still doing it. We didn’t just meet you yesterday. However, no matter how much you do this, we will not respond to your sacred things in the same way.” (Erdoğan, 2018k).

Erdoğan has, similar to Orbán’s rhetoric, frequently emphasized that losing the election would have catastrophic consequences for the nation. The belief that the upcoming election would be a major and existential turning point has been reinforced by this fear-based narrative, which acts as a powerful mobilizing tool. Erdoğan has hoped to instill a sense of urgency in his followers and encouraged them to vote out of fear rather than pure political preference, by implying that this could be the “last real election” if the current administration would not win.

“Based on the outcome of this election, our country will either continue the uninterrupted 16-year journey of democracy and development or lose many of the hard-earned gains achieved through tough struggles. ... As our nation has done until now, on June 24, it will once again reflect its will freely at the ballot box. We have not recognized, and do not recognize, any power above national will. I have no doubt that in the June 24 elections, where our country will step into a new era, our nation will make the most accurate decision again. I especially urge you to support the 2023 goals that represent our country’s hopes in every field from democracy to the economy”. (Erdoğan, 2018i).

“The June 24 elections are among the most important elections in the history of our country. ... We will either leave a much more prosperous country to our children or return to the old Türkiye begging for money at the doors of the IMF” (Erdoğan, 2018l).

“Those who look to Pennsylvania, listen to America, and align their hearts with Qandil will bring no benefit to this country. If it were up to them, the flags of the separatist organization would still be flying in Afrin instead of our flag. ... If it were up to them, ISIS murderers would still be running rampant just across our border. If it were up to them, FETO would still be draining the lifeblood of our nation. If it were up to them, bombs would still be exploding all over our country” (Erdoğan, 2018m).

### **5.2.2. 2023 General Elections**

The propaganda period for the 2023 General and Parliamentary Elections lasted from March 18, 2023, to May 13, 2023. As in the previous section, Erdoğan’s speeches taken from the official presidential website were selected to be analyzed within the framework of populist foreign policy making. What makes the 2023 elections different is that the propaganda process began immediately after the Kahramanmaraş earthquake<sup>43</sup> on February 6, 2023. Given the magnitude and socio-political repercussions of this disaster, Erdoğan’s rhetoric during the election campaign needs to be examined in this specific context. Although government-affiliated municipalities and construction companies (many of which are known for their close ties to the ruling party) are widely perceived as responsible for the destruction and significant loss of life following the earthquake, the election results still favored Erdoğan and the AKP.

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<sup>43</sup> On February 6, 2023, two powerful earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6 occurred in the eastern and central parts of Türkiye, causing great destruction and significant loss of life in both Türkiye and Syria.

This phenomenon deserves to be examined from multiple perspectives, especially in the areas of political psychology and electoral behavior.

Equally significant is the opposition's failure to achieve victory despite the perception that the government was responsible for the disaster. On the one hand, there was a government that was held responsible for the widespread destruction caused by the earthquake, which resulted in significant human and material losses. On the other hand, the opposition failed to capitalize on the crisis and effectively communicated how it would solve the problems it criticized. This strategic shortcoming contributed to the opposition and its supporters continuing to be framed as the "enemy other" in the government's and Erdoğan's populist rhetoric.

A historical parallel can be drawn with the 1999 earthquake<sup>44</sup> and the subsequent economic crisis, which led to the electoral defeat of the ruling government and, ironically, paved the way for AKP's political dominance starting in 2002 that lasted more than two decades. A comparative study of the elections that changed the government a few years after the earthquake, the 2023 elections, and the elections planned for 2028 can provide valuable information about political dynamics in Türkiye and the role of political psychology in electoral behavior.

"Türkiye, with its state and its people, possesses the capacity to confront difficulties, transform crises into opportunities, and 'rise anew from the ashes'. We must, however, avoid heeding those who seek discord and strife. We must not allow any harm to come to our unity, solidarity, and brotherhood. We must not give in to the purveyors of constant pessimism and doom. I pray that God protects our country from all forms of calamity, disaster, and misfortune." (Erdoğan, 2023a).

The need for cooperation and solidarity in crisis management has been brought to light by recent earthquakes and floods. While there was much skepticism towards international organizations in 2018, there has been a noticeable shift in conversations about how to respond to these latest tragedies. There has been a strategic reassessment of government attitudes towards external actors and external aid, with a greater focus on recognition and approval.

"In these difficult times, we will never forget the solidarity shown by all our friends—institutions, member and candidate countries of the EU, the United Nations, and other

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<sup>44</sup> 1999 Gölcük Earthquake, İzmit Earthquake, Marmara Earthquake or 17 August 1999 earthquake, the earthquake centered in Kocaeli/Gölcük that occurred on the morning of 17 August 1999 at 03:02 local time. The earthquake, whose instrumental magnitude was measured as Mw=7.4 (Kandilli Observatory) or Mw=7.6 (USGS), caused extensive loss of life and property.



international organizations. ... another example of the strong foundations of the relationships between our peoples. The contributions you make ... will assist us in healing the wounds of the earthquake and removing the traces of the disaster. Because our real struggle begins now.” (Erdoğan, 2023b).

While the government’s stance toward international organizations has changed over time, its framing of the domestic opposition and the foreign powers that allegedly support them has remained consistent. Despite projecting an image of mismanagement and a government on the verge of collapse during this election season, the ruling party once again focused its discourse on national security, a highly sensitive issue for the Turkish electorate. Populist discourse continued to draw a sharp distinction between “us”—the Turkish people and those who support the government—and “them”—the opposition and everyone else. While the opposition was accused of collaborating with terrorist organizations, the government also pointed to foreign countries that allegedly supported the opposition, thus strengthening its position in international relations through the lens of populist-nationalist discourse.

“I am aware that these negotiations have reopened old wounds. Especially the leaders and associates of the main opposition party, during this period of the earthquake disaster, have still been working to darken the future of our country at the same table as these groups. I believe that on May 14, we will collectively thwart these efforts. We are all witnessing how these unacceptable images have emboldened enemies of the nation and the country. Do not let the fact that some are standing guard at the door of the separatist organization’s extensions ... discourage you. Türkiye, with its state and people, has the strength, capacity, and resolve to thwart all these schemes. As long as we firmly uphold our unity, solidarity, and brotherhood, there is no issue we cannot overcome” (Erdoğan, 2023c).

“Have we succeeded in fighting terrorism? Are there terrorists present? Where is the PKK/YPG now? By God’s will, this government has buried these terrorist organizations. It will continue to do so, but currently, we see that Mr. Kemal<sup>45</sup> is collaborating with PKK’s extensions in Parliament<sup>46</sup>. He is preparing for the May 14 election with them. Where will we provide the best answer to this? At the ballot box on May 14. ... we will

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<sup>45</sup> The leader of the main opposition party at the time, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. President Erdoğan addressed Kılıçdaroğlu as Mr. Kemal in his speeches.

<sup>46</sup> He was referring to the HDP - The Peoples’ Democratic Party is a political party operating in Türkiye, founded on 15 October 2012. According to the party statute, its official abbreviation is “HDP”.

hold them accountable on May 14. I see in your eyes that you are ready for this. One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state.” (Erdoğan, 2023d).

Like the 2016 coup attempt, these earthquakes provided the government with an opportunity to construct a “war of liberation” narrative. This framing allowed the government to position itself as the country’s sole protector, framing disaster response as a struggle for survival rather than a matter of governance and accountability.

“...We will fight together and rebuild everything that was destroyed, better, more beautiful, and safer. We will regain and replace everything we lost, except for our lives. This nation has come through numerous street riots, political traps, economic snares, terrorist attacks, and global impositions. ...In our vision for the Century of Türkiye, we remain committed to our goal of becoming one of the world’s ten most developed countries. You remember what has been done to deter us over the past decade. We have overcome all obstacles with the faith, determination, and courage of our people” (Erdoğan, 2023e).

Erdoğan’s discourses focused on the idea of “rising together” after the earthquakes, aimed to strengthen the collective narrative of national resilience. Through portraying the country as one that has always struggled together against hardship, he presented past and present challenges as part of an ongoing historical struggle, thus aiming to create a sense of harmony and courage. Moreover, populist discourse has consistently mobilized electoral support, as seen in the reemergence of rhetorical patterns from the 2018 elections to 2023.

“We observe that political crises, conflicts, wars, and tensions are prevalent across the country, and that every global crisis impacts our geography. Some societies and states that have not yet resolved their millennia-old grievances with our people... No one dares to directly attack our homeland as in the First World War or the National War, but they do not refrain from ... using terrorist organizations, political and social chaos experiments, and economic traps. ... We have witnessed nearly 40 years of PKK terrorism, the betrayal of FETO trying to stab us like a dagger, and many other trials...” (Erdoğan, 2023f).

“No one has the power to take Türkiye back a quarter or half a century. Our nation will not allow it. Those who walk hand in hand with terrorists have nothing to offer my country... with God’s permission, you will bury them at the ballot box on May 14th.” (Erdoğan, 2023g).

Similar to the 2018 election rhetoric, the 2023 election rhetoric conveyed the message that not only the Turkish nation, but also other “oppressed” nations were protected. Through this narrative, the portrayal of being the global leader of the Muslim world was strengthened.

“...We have built a strong, reputable, and honorable Türkiye that is a beacon of hope not only for our own citizens but for all oppressed and suffering people from Africa to Asia. We achieved all this despite numerous obstacles, traps, and attacks. ...The upcoming elections will be the decisive moment...” (Erdoğan, 2023h).

The elections are once again presented as the last opportunity to achieve the targeted goals. At the same time, both foreign and domestic policy narratives are being constructed while the continuation of international cooperation is emphasized.

“We are strengthening our cooperation with the Turkish world in every field. ...We will not stop or deviate from our goals until we realize the great rise we call the Turkish Century. Just like our heroic ancestors did in the 100th year of our Republic, we will write a new success story as 85 million. Remember, May 14th is a turning point for the continuation of all these achievements and the addition of new ones” (Erdoğan, 2023i).

“...every election is a crossroads. Since we came to power in 2002, we have experienced this crossroads with our nation in every election. As you recall, in the 2007 elections, our nation made a choice between tutelage and national will. In the 2011 elections, our nation made a choice between our 2023 goals and old Türkiye. In the 2015 elections, our nation faced a choice between our independence and future and the attacks of the PKK to divide our homeland and FETO to seize our country. In the 2018 elections, our nation responded to the July 15 coup attempt by supporting our new governance system. Today, we are once again on the eve of an election and facing another choice. On one side, there is the vision of the ‘Century of Türkiye’ with all its aspects, from the earthquake to the National Technology Initiative, from regional sovereignty rights to the goal of becoming a global political and economic power. On the other side, there is the dream of the 7-party coalition<sup>47</sup> and the PKK and FETO leaders who have become their most ardent defenders—a desire for Türkiye under the yoke of imperialists” (Erdoğan, 2023j).

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<sup>47</sup> The Nation Alliance is an election alliance established on May 5, 2018, between the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the Good Party, the Felicity Party (SAADET) and the Democrat Party (DP). Later, the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA Party) and the Future Party (Gelecek) joined the alliance. Tayyip Erdoğan stated that the HDP is also in this alliance and called it the 7-party coalition.

The president not only framed the upcoming elections as the last opportunity to achieve national goals but also accused them of potentially surrendering the country to foreign powers if they came to power. This rhetoric gave those in power the opportunity to shape the perception of Turkish voters by drawing on the historical narrative of a nation that fought a War of Independence following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and refused to accept any form of mandate or foreign tutelage.

“They are plotting to overturn our national foreign policy, which has allowed us to exercise our sovereignty rights on a regional and global level after a long time. What does he say? He says he will bring 300 billion dollars from England, from London. They can love you, Bay Bay Kemal<sup>48</sup>. So, did London’s usurers have so much lost money that they will send it to you?” (Erdoğan, 2023k).

“...The imperialists, whom we cut off from our country after a tough struggle, will come back and make us dependent on them again. How will they do this? They will close the valve of the gas we found in the Black Sea, and they will pour concrete over the oil wells we discovered in Gabar, just as they did before. They will tear down the security barriers we established beyond our borders and once again drown our cities in blood and fire” (Erdoğan, 2023l).

“...They will immediately accept the EU’s autonomy condition and open the way to divide Türkiye like other countries around us. They will further this step by returning the municipalities we have appointed trustees to back to the terrorist organization and by reintroducing the organization members we have removed from public positions into the state. Afterwards, they will flood the country with all the issues that the West has used to force us into submission for years” (Erdoğan, 2023m).

Although Erdoğan, his party and his electorate are generally ideologically distant from Kemalism, his occasional references to Atatürk in some of his speeches can be interpreted as a strategic move to appeal to the Kemalist segments of society. Simultaneously, this rhetorical strategy may function to consolidate support among AKP constituents who, despite not aligning with Kemalist ideology, nonetheless maintain a deep respect for Atatürk as the foundational figure of the Turkish Republic.

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<sup>48</sup> Tayyip Erdoğan employs a wordplay in his rhetoric. The Turkish word “Bay” corresponds to “Mr.” in English, while “Bye bye” is phonetically read as “Bay bay” in Turkish. By addressing the opposition leader as “Bay Bay Kemal”, Erdoğan subtly implies that his opponent will lose the election while maintaining a seemingly respectful tone in his speech.

“May 14 will be an election that will free our country’s economy from oppression, similar to how Gazi Mustafa Kemal once pointed to the homeland from İzmir a century ago. May 14 will be a victory for the national and local stance against those who want to hand over Türkiye’s economy to London usurers, its security to terrorist organizations, and its foreign policy to imperialists. May 14 will be a choice for the determination to elevate our country and nation to the place they deserve in every field in the new century of our Republic...” (Erdoğan, 2023n).

During these elections, the opposition is most frequently portrayed as being “aligned with imperialist powers, walking hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with them”. Erdoğan frames the “evil other” in this narrative in a straightforward and unambiguous manner, portraying the main opposition party as the domestic extension of foreign forces attempting to undermine the country. In addition to intentionally influencing the trajectory of foreign policy debate and delegitimizing the opposition, this framing strengthens the idea of a country under attack both at home and abroad.

“It is very important for the People’s Alliance<sup>49</sup> to be in power. If it were up to them, they would turn our country upside down, but we will not give them this opportunity. We will tightly hold on to our unity, togetherness, and brotherhood. We will not give a chance to those who try to sow discord among us. We will bury in the ballot box on May 14th those who seek to come to power through cooperation with FETO members and separatists, instead of relying on the will of the people and the approval... (Erdoğan, 2023o).

Erdoğan has claimed that he was the only leader who could protect Türkiye’s sovereignty thanks to his superior diplomatic skills, accusing Kılıçdaroğlu of having a wrong evaluation towards foreign powers. This perception not only fuels nationalist sentiments, but also psychologically creates fear and insecurity in the opposition. He has linked his election victory to national security, portrayed foreign actors as threat, and incorporated foreign policy into domestic political discourse. In doing so, he maintains the image of a strong leader who defends his country while ensuring that his populist rhetoric will play a key role in achieving his political goals both domestically and internationally.

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<sup>49</sup> *Millet İttifakı*

“...Bay Bay Kemal has started picking on Russia... He says Russia is directing the elections in Türkiye. Shame, shame on you. If I were to say that America<sup>50</sup> is directing the elections in Türkiye, that Germany is directing them, that France is directing them, that the United Kingdom is directing them, what would you say? You don't know them as well as I do. I have practically read their souls. I've been meeting with them for 20 years, I've sat at the same tables with them many times over the past 20 years, and I talk with them. How many times have you met them? How do you know them? ...Liars like you won't get a single cent. Because these people know your kind and your character very well...” (Erdoğan, 2023p).

### **5.3. Analysis of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Election Discourses**

In President Erdoğan's rhetoric, the Turkish language and the words he chooses can indeed sometimes be characterized as coarse jargon, and even as a colloquial “street language” (Sariaslan, 2024). This style of communication can have various effects on the masses. Because the electorates see Erdoğan as one of their own, many people may find his use of language warm and relatable and feel more connected to him. Through this conversation, people can better understand complex political issues, and the leader can engage with them on a more personal and intimate level.

The language used in politics has a significant impact on the public's psychology and, therefore, their voting behavior (Burnett & Kogan, 2015). Coarse and direct language can evoke a strong emotional response, particularly among broad segments of society (Skidmore, 2015; Sliusarenko, 2023). This kind of language reinforces the image of the leader as “strong”, “decisive”, and “speaking the people's language”, while portraying opponents as elitist and disconnected from the public. It can be said that Erdoğan's use of this language strengthens his perception among voters and solidifies his leadership position.

President Erdoğan constructs his discourses in a way that combines populism, political psychology and foreign policymaking, which strengthens his political position. His emphasizing Türkiye's autonomous and strong position on the international stage, presenting it as a major actor on the battlefield and in diplomacy rather than a nation that is now subservient to other powers. This attitude carries a potential to appeal to national pride and portrays Erdoğan as a strong leader who protects Türkiye's interests against external threats.

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<sup>50</sup> In Turkish, the United States of America is generally called as America.

Erdoğan's rhetoric appeals to national identity and shared concerns to mobilize popular support and create a sense of solidarity against common enemies. Through this psychological manipulation, he maintains his potential for re-election at home while pursuing a high-tension foreign policy. The assumption that Erdoğan represents the state, and the state represents Erdoğan is supported by his rhetoric, which tends to establish a connection with Türkiye. Populist leaders often use this rhetorical tool to combine their personal identity with national identity (Crick, 2005; Mao, 2017). In such a framework, a leader's personal beliefs and ideological position are inextricably linked to national identity; if the leader is a strong believer, the nation is portrayed as fundamentally religious; if the leader projects a secular personality, the state is portrayed as free of religious sentiments. Since the leader's perspective and self-perception have a direct impact on Türkiye's status in international relations, this individualized understanding of leadership not only affects domestic politics but also has important implications for foreign policymaking.

“The struggle of the AK Party<sup>51</sup> is the struggle of Türkiye itself, so much so that the fate of the AK Party has become almost identical with the fate of Türkiye. That's why the primary target of those attacking Türkiye is the AK Party. What is being done now is to find a way to suppress the AK Party and Erdoğan within a month. I want you to stand by not just the AK Party but your country, by not just your country but your people, and by not just your people but the future of your children. June 24<sup>52</sup> is a historic turning point in this regard.” (Erdoğan, 2018).

Erdoğan's focus on terrorism, a highly sensitive issue for the Turkish people, should also be considered when examining his campaign speech. Since Erdoğan and his party are seen by both his followers and himself as the only ones who can protect Türkiye from terrorism, this narrative serves as an effective way to strengthen his support base. Additionally, by stating security concerns, this discourse might influence voters who prioritize national security. The fight against terrorism, while seemingly a domestic security concern, is closely tied to international relations and foreign policy (Savun & Phillips, 2009). How a country handles internal security concerns like terrorism affects its foreign policy, alliances, and diplomatic and strategic interactions on the global scene.

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<sup>51</sup> In addition to being the president, Erdoğan can also be a party member and even a party leader due to the administrative system AKP has changed. It is also seen that Erdoğan frequently identifies his party with himself in his statements.

<sup>52</sup> Presidential elections were also held in 2023, and since no candidate could exceed 50% of the votes, the presidential elections were postponed to the second round, which was June 24, 2023.

Rewriting historical narratives to suit Erdoğan's political goals is another aspect of his rhetorical technique. This attempt to rewrite history is one of the most striking aspects of his speech, especially when considering national conflicts such as the 2016 coup attempt, which he portrays as a new "War of Independence". By portraying Erdoğan's leadership as a turning point in Türkiye's history, this narrative aims to elevate the country's current challenges as significant. By presenting his administration as the rightful heir of the republic's founders, this mythmaking helps him align his political image with national values. Erdoğan's use of figurative language is an important tool in creating myths as well as supporting the us-versus-them narrative. Erdoğan uses powerful psychological tactics to galvanize voters by repeatedly referring to his followers as "naive" people and his opponents as "enemies" of the country. His discourse creates a sense of existential danger and urgency, strengthening the call to action at the ballot box. For example, his portrayal of the opposition as partners with foreign powers and terrorist groups is an analogy of the populist strategy of creating a single enemy to defend his authoritarian policies and strengthen national cohesion.

Erdoğan uses his populist rhetoric as an effective tool to influence both domestic and foreign affairs. By endorsing a foreign policy that prioritizes Turkish interests over international cooperation, especially cooperation with Western countries, his statements present him as a defender of Turkish sovereignty and national identity. Due to his ultra-nationalist rhetoric and his emphasis on Türkiye's isolation, he appears as a leader willing to withstand international pressure to protect his country's independence. However, it should be emphasized that Erdoğan's nationalism does not solely refer to the Turkishness, but rather a nationalism that unites around an ummah, as has been previously stated.

In conclusion, Erdoğan's speeches during the election campaign periods powerfully combine political psychology, foreign policy framing, and populist rhetoric. His use of plainspoken language, historical narratives, and metaphors creates a strong sense of national identity that ties his leadership to Türkiye's sovereignty and international recognition. In addition to rallying support domestically, Erdoğan uses his speeches to influence how the world views Türkiye, presenting himself as a global leader and national hero who protects the country from both domestic and external threats. In an increasingly polarized domestic and global political environment, this rhetorical technique maintains his legitimacy, solidifies his authority, and ensures his political survival.



## CHAPTER 6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This part of the study aims to clarify the structures and purposes of the “us and them” narrative in the political discourses of Erdoğan and Orbán using a comparative perspective. Through this distinction and comparative examination, the main research question of the dissertation, “How does political psychology contribute to the understanding of populist international relations?” will be answered in a summative manner. The results obtained from the case studies conducted in the previous part will be examined in a comparative manner for this purpose. References to the theoretical issues raised in the relevant part will enrich the discussion. Furthermore, when necessary, the discussion will benefit from references to relevant literature on the case political leaders and populist politics in Hungary and Türkiye.

The discussion will be structured in four closely interconnected parts. The evolution of populism in the discourses examined will be the first part. The study will compare the cases to identify specific and shared components in conceptualizations of the us-versus-them worldview, as well as to determine which parts and dimensions are prioritized and emphasized. The next part will examine and compare the ways in which leaders use their discourses to reposition and reshape their voters and choices. Thus, the ways in which populist discourses support and legitimize leaders’ policies will be examined. The role of populist discourses in positioning the case nations in the international arena will be examined in the next part. The comparative section will conclude by discussing how leaders construct the concepts of “us” and “who is against us”. An attempt will be made through this four-way comparative data review to understand how the elected right-wing leaders of power, Orbán and Erdoğan, construct their discourses around the narrative of “us against them” and how their discourses play a role in their political tactics. Another goal of this strategy is to find distinct and recurring themes in the speeches of these political leaders.

### 6.1. Populism

As discussed in the theoretical section, populism has been portrayed as a contemporary political zeitgeist (Peters & Pierre, 2020). Likewise, leaders’ conceptualizations of the phenomenon are the most salient indicators of how their populism operates in any political arena (Pappas, 2012, pp. 2, 3). 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 (Glieb, 2020, p. 38). Orbán's discourse is largely framed around anti-immigrant and anti-foreign sentiments (Glieb, 2020, pp. 36-38). 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 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 (Glieb, 2020, pp. 25, 26).

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.

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.

## 6.2. 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 (1895) 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 (Gerim, 2022).

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. 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.

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 (Wring et al., 2017, p. 98). 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 (Wring et al., 2017, p. 97-99).

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*" (Erdoğan, as cited in Turkish Minute, 2017). Likewise, Orbán positions himself as a vital leader required to safeguard Hungary's political, as well as cultural, cohesion. According to Csigó and Merkovity (2016), Orbán has, by doing a "permanent revolution... in the name of the people" converted the state into an "illiberal regime", concentrating power in a fashion weakening checks and balances, while moving it toward centralization around his leadership (p. 299). 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 (p. 303).

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 (Glieb, 2020, p. 40). 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.

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.

### **6.3. 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 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 (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023, p. 12); Orbán takes a similar stance, but more limited, emphasizing the protection of "Christianity" and "Christians" in Europe (Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017, p. 327). 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 (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023, p. 4). Orbán's rhetoric reflects a similar distrust of such large multinational organizations (Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017, p. 329). 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 (Csehi & Zgut, 2021, p. 58). Liberal principles that support the function of international organizations in resolving disputes and promoting cooperation stand in contrast to this pessimism (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 516). 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 (Waldroff, 2020). 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 (Glied, 2020, p. 40).

The conscious use of foreign policy discourse not only affects domestic politics but also has broader implications for global affairs (Özyüksel, 2023). 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 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 (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023, p. 4). 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 (Glieb, 2020, p. 40). 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 (Bocskor, 2018, p. 564). 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. (Hazır, 2022, p. 177). 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 (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, pp. 694-696).

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 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. Orbán advocates a “Christian Europe” against secular liberalism and Muslim immigration, using Christianity as a cornerstone of Hungarian 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 (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2025). Orbán, on the other hand, consistently blocks EU sanctions on Moscow and opposes NATO military expansion and has expressed more openly pro-Russian views. Despite criticism from the EU, his ties with Putin are presented as protecting Hungarian interests (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, p. 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.

#### **6.4. 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. (2020) 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. This strategy is called "populist identity framing" because ordinary people are perceived as threatened by various outgroups within their own group (Bos et al. 2020, p. 3). Orbán and Erdoğan also construct their populist discourses in this vein, making a distinction between us and them accordingly. According to Tajfel (1982), 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 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 (Toksabay & Tattersall, 2016). 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 (Luhn, 2023). 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 (Glien, 2020, p. 38). His political message focuses on his anti-Soros rhetoric, portraying opposition leaders as "traitors" who have been deceived by external forces (Witte, 2018).

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 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.

Aspect	Viktor Orbán (Hungary)	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Türkiye)
Historical Trajectory of Populism	Orbán's populism increased significantly after the 2015 migration crisis.	The historical roots of populism in Türkiye are longer and are linked to the transition to multi-party life in the 20th century.
Populism Framework	Nationalism focused on defending Christian identity and European sovereignty.	Nationalism intertwined with Islamism positions Türkiye as the global defender of Muslims (ummah).

Core Narrative	National sovereignty framed around “Christian Europe” and anti-immigrant discourses.	Strong nationalist rhetoric that positions Erdoğan as the savior of the nation.
Foreign Policy Impact	Orbán uses populist rhetoric against EU influence and focuses on Hungary’s sovereignty and Christian identity.	Populism supports Erdoğan’s geopolitical goals and uses both domestic and foreign policies to consolidate power.
Use of Crisis in Rhetoric	The 2015 migration crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war to consolidate authority and challenge EU policies.	The 2016 coup attempt, and the 2023 earthquakes are considered as opportunities to strengthen the legitimacy of the leadership.
“Us versus Them” Rhetoric	Orbán portrays the opposition as agents of external powers such as George Soros and the EU and presents himself as a safeguard of Hungary.	Erdoğan portrays the opposition as collaborators of imperialist powers and presents himself as a defender of Turkish sovereignty.
National Identity Construction	National identity was centered on Christianity and protection from external liberal influences.	National identity, closely tied to Islamic values and sovereignty, is a narrative about Türkiye’s rightful place in the global arena.
Leadership Personalization	Orbán personalizes leadership by framing himself as a defender of Hungary’s cultural and political identity.	Erdoğan blurs the line between his leadership and the survival of the state, identifying his leadership with the future of Türkiye.
Relationship with the West	It opposes the EU’s policies on immigration, LGBTQ+ rights and the rule of law, but maintains economic ties with the EU.	While criticizing the West’s double standards, he also establishes pragmatic relationships.
Populism and Political Psychology	Orbán uses populism to strengthen his power domestically and resist external influences, exploiting fears of cultural and religious erosion.	By using national unity in response to external threats, populist discourse strategically appeals to fears of loss of sovereignty and national survival.

*Source: Author’s own drawing*

## CONCLUSION

To begin with, 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. 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. The study combines political psychology with CDA and international relations theories such as constructivism, poststructuralism, 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. 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.

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 (1995, 2006) and Chilton (2004, 2010), 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. According to the method chosen in 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 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.

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 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. 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.

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. However, it does offer a valuable avenue for future research, especially in light of emerging political developments in both countries. Recent changes suggest that the winds of political change may be strengthening in Hungary and Türkiye and may create new dynamics that deserve academic attention. In the Turkish context, a particularly interesting development is the increasing importance of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, at the national level. Although he is not the official leader of any political party, İmamoğlu was presented as a presidential candidate for the 2028 elections by CHP and primaries were held for his candidacy, in which the public could participate. The emergence of such politicians outside of traditional party leadership structures raises significant concerns about voter psychology, political leadership, and the changing character of opposition discourse. Examining the components of populism in İmamoğlu's discourse, especially in terms of political psychology, can contribute to the literature. It would also be interesting to examine why a significant portion of the Turkish electorate continues to support populist politicians despite growing political and economic challenges. This would require further research into the symbolic roles that populist politicians play in the public imagination and the underlying psychological, cultural, and historical factors that influence voting behavior in Türkiye. To better understand how these dynamics have changed over time, such studies could use longitudinal discourse analysis, political psychology experiments, or public opinion surveys.

In the case of Hungary, it remains a valuable research topic to investigate whether the new immigration law and increasingly strict regulations that are likely to be introduced with a populist approach in 2024 will have any impact on voters in the 2026 elections. This can provide insight into which populist policies have the potential to succeed, and which have the opposite effect on the public, making it a fertile area to investigate the effectiveness of past populist political strategies.

In summary, both countries are experiencing developments that have the potential to affect not only their domestic politics but also their foreign policy and their positions in international relations. This highlights the need for further research linking political psychology and populism to better understand and predict what has happened, what is happening now, and what will happen in the world, both in the past and in the future.



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