

THE RECONVERSION OF HAGIA SOPHIA INTO A MOSQUE AS A CASE OF
RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY TÜRKİYE

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ABSTRACT

THE RECONVERSION OF HAGIA SOPHIA INTO A MOSQUE AS A CASE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY TÜRKİYE

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This thesis analyzes the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in Türkiye in 2020 in the framework of right-wing populism. The reconversion will be discussed regarding the politics of the ruling Justice and Development Party and the broader socio-political context in Türkiye. The study has adopted the critical discourse analysis to conduct a textual analysis of the political text and talk obtained from two different sources, parliamentary proceedings, and media speeches regarding the reconversion. The study's main aim is to critically evaluate the political discourse surrounding the Hagia Sophia in relation to its cultural, political, and symbolic meanings. Hence, the portrayal of the reconversion through the political discourse will be discussed according to the JDP's ongoing populist politics.

Keywords: Right-wing Populism, Hagia Sophia, Religious Nationalism, Political Discourse

ÖZ

GÜNÜMÜZ TÜRKİYE’SİNDE SAĞ POPÜLİZM ÖRNEĞİ OLARAK AYASOFYA’NIN CAMİYE DÖNÜŞTÜRÜLMESİ

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Mevcut tez, 2020 yılında Türkiye’de Ayasofya’nın yeniden camiye dönüştürülmesini sağ popülizm çerçevesinde analiz etmektedir. Dönüşüm, iktidarda olan Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi’nin politikaları ve Türkiye’deki daha geniş sosyo-politik bağlam çerçevesinde tartışılacaktır. Çalışma, iki farklı kaynaktan, meclis tutanakları ve medya konuşmalarından elde edilen siyasi metin ve konuşmaların söylemsel analizini yapmak için eleştirel söylem analizini benimsemiştir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, Ayasofya’yı çevreleyen siyasi söylemi kültürel, siyasi ve sembolik anlamlarıyla ilişkili olarak eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirmektir. Dolayısıyla, yeniden dönüşümün siyasi söylem üzerinden tasviri, AKP’nin süregelen popülist politikalarına göre tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sağ Popülizm, Ayasofya, Dini Milliyetçilik, Siyasal Söylem

To My Father

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
EU	European Union
GP	Good Party
JDP	Justice and Development Party
MP	Member of the Parliament
NMP	Nationalist Movement Party
PDA	Political Discourse Analysis
PDP	Peoples's Democratic Party
RPP	Republican People's Party
TRT	Turkish Radio and Television Association
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“A Spectre is haunting the world – populism” (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, p. 1). After Ionescu and Gellner's book was published 55 years ago, populism is back on the agenda of many scholars from distinct branches. While this shows a circularity in world politics, Türkiye, under the rule of the Justice and Development Party, has also its share of populist policies. Starting by problematizing the prevalence of populist politics while its definition is still ambiguous, this study aims to search for the projections of right-wing populist policies in the recent practice of the JDP government, the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, from a museum to a mosque in 2020, largely influenced by religious and nationalistic sentiment, has been widely perceived as a strategic maneuver by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) to strengthen its power base and appeal to conservative and nationalist constituencies.

This thesis contends that the reconversion of Hagia Sophia is a clear reflection of right-wing populism in contemporary Türkiye. Right-wing populism often thrives on a narrative of cultural decline, a perceived threat to national identity, and a yearning for a return to an idealized past. By leveraging religious symbols and historical narratives, the JDP has effectively mobilized a significant portion of its electorate, especially those who feel marginalized and estranged from the secular establishment. Hence, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia can be viewed as a calculated effort to reclaim a national symbol, redefine Turkish-Muslim identity in a more conservative and religious direction, and consolidate

the JDP's political influence. This thesis will explore the historical context of the reconversion, the political motivations driving the decision, and the production of the populist political discourse on the issue of the reconversion.

The subsequent sections will present the background of the decision for the reconversion, an overview of the JDP's populist strategies, and a statement of the research question and objectives of the current study.

1.1. Background and Context of Hagia Sophia's Reconversion

The Hagia Sophia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been a symbol of religious and cultural confluence for centuries. It was originally built as a Christian cathedral in the 6th century, serving as the spiritual center of the Byzantine Orthodox Church. Its construction was a testament to the Byzantine Empire's wealth, power, and religious devotion (Sullivan, 2021). The cathedral's architectural innovations, such as the dome and pendentives, influenced the design of subsequent religious buildings throughout Europe. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque (Sqour, 2016). Sultan Mehmet II, who oversaw the conquest, ordered removing Christian symbols and adding Islamic elements, such as minarets, mihrab, and maqsura. The mosque symbolized Ottoman power and religious dominance, attracting pilgrims and worshippers from across the empire. In 1934, under the secularizing policies of Atatürk, the mosque was transformed into a museum, symbolizing Türkiye's transition from an Islamic empire to a secular republic and promoting a secular and pluralistic vision (Kaya, 2019). The museum was a popular tourist attraction and a symbol of Türkiye's rich cultural heritage.

A departure from the secular policies established by the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has intensified since the Justice and Development Party came to power in Türkiye. JDP has portrayed itself as having Islamic sensitivities, unlike the previous political establishment, over issues such as religious education and the ban on the headscarf in state institutions (Duran, 2008). In that sense, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 was a significant event in politics in Türkiye, marking the

JDP's efforts to make legal changes to meet the Islamist demands of its electorate. The JDP, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, justified the move on the grounds that it was a historical injustice to maintain Hagia Sophia as a museum. The party argued that the reconversion was a necessary step to restore Türkiye's Islamic heritage and to strengthen its ties with the Muslim world:

May it be auspicious and blessed for the entire Islamic world. Hagia Sophia, the symbol of conquest, has regained the status and freedom it deserves. May Allah be pleased with you, our President, who put an end to the victimization of believers and the condemnation of history through Hagia Sophia. (Oktay, 10/07/2020)

The identification of the JDP with the public in Türkiye, therefore, was tried to be reinforced through the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia, which has been politically loaded with Islamist and nationalist values. It was presented as the symbol of freedom, democracy, and a historical right for all the Turkish and Muslim people. President Erdoğan played a central role in the decision for the reconversion, with the claims of the politicians from JDP and pro-JDP like parties, the Nationalist Movement Party, portraying him as the savior who put an end to the "victimization" of the people. However, contrary to the arguments of the politicians from the JDP and pro-JDP parties, members of the opposition, such as MPs from the Peoples' Democratic Party, claimed that the decision was politically motivated:

You will not cover your crimes and sins by Hagia Sophia, a mosque. The oppressed people you committed genocide will come back to haunt you; you will not be able to prevent this by building a million mosques. You are using religion against religion. (Gergerlioğlu, 10/07/2020)

Accordingly, the JDP was accused of using the reconversion instrumentally to garner support and cover up their existing anti-democratic practices. Supporters, on the other hand, contended that the Hagia Sophia was an Islamic monument and that its reconversion was a rightful assertion of the sovereignty of the people in Türkiye. The decision also strained Türkiye's relations with Greece and other countries with significant Orthodox Christian populations:

Countries, focal points, and circles fueled by hostility queuing up to destroy and harass our religious rights and sovereignty gains have lost. The will is the nation's; the decision is the law's. (Bahçeli, 10/07/2020)

Hence, the decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia into a mosque was a controversial one, sparking both domestic and international debate (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024; (Konakçı, 2023; Sofos, 2021; Taş, 2022). This study examines the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque as a case that exemplifies the right-wing policies in contemporary Türkiye, arguing that the reconversion was a strategic move by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) to consolidate its power and promote its ideological agenda through the reproduction of power by the identity formation of the public with their leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

1.1.Overview of JDP's Populist Strategies

The JDP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been in power in Türkiye since 2002. The JDP's rise to power and its subsequent consolidation of authority can be attributed, in part, to its effective populist strategies, such as anti-establishment discourses, deepening the divide between us vs. them, and emotional political appeals (Demiryol, 2020; Baykan, 2021; Aslan, 2024; Elçi, 2022). Populism, as defined by Mudde (2004), is an ideology characterized by a thin ideological core, opposition to the political establishment, and a strong emphasis on the "people" versus the "elite." The JDP has successfully cultivated a populist image by positioning itself as the champion of the marginalized and the excluded by emphasizing its commitment to social justice, economic development, and democratic conservatism (Cizre, 2008). Hence, one of the key strategies employed by the JDP has been the construction of a narrative of victimhood by presenting itself as a defender of the "silent majority" of the public who was marginalized by the secular elite (Elçi, 2022). This narrative has been particularly effective in mobilizing support among conservative and religious voters (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018).

Another important strategy has been the use of politics of nostalgia to evoke a sense of national pride and unity. The JDP has frequently invoked the Ottoman Empire as a symbol of Türkiye's past glory and has sought to revive its legacy (Kaya, 2021). This nostalgic rhetoric has been used to legitimize the party's policies and to foster a sense of belonging among the public. With the Ottoman legacy, JDP emphasizes its Islamic identity and appeals to the religious sentiments of its constituents. The reconversion of the Hagia

Sophia into a mosque can be seen as a manifestation of this religious nationalist agenda. The party has employed various tactics, such as controlling the media, manipulating elections, and suppressing dissent, to maintain its grip on power (Tekdemir, 2023). The JDP's populist strategies have contributed to the polarization of the society in Türkiye (Baykan, 2018). The party has successfully mobilized its supporters against a perceived "other," which includes secularists, Kemalists, and eventually, any political opposition (Cizre, 2008). This polarization has had a negative impact on social cohesion in Türkiye, leading the erosion of democratic norms and institutions (Somer, 2018).

1.3. Statement of the Research Question and Objectives

The aim of this study is to critically evaluate the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque within the context of right-wing populism in contemporary Türkiye. In this regard, the main research question is as follows: How the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia was related to the populist strategies employed by JDP? Hence, the study aims to analyze the relationship between the scholarly approaches to populism and the ongoing populist policies in Türkiye with the projections of these relationships in the Hagia Sophia case. In this framework, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia was analyzed in relation to the prominent concepts of populism, the distinction between “the people and the other,” general will, anti-establishment politics, charismatic leadership, and national heritage.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Definition and Characteristics of Populism

This chapter introduces the theoretical background of the thesis. It explains various definitions and approaches to populism and how this study employs the concept. The following sections will provide the definition of populism and introduce different scholarly approaches. Then, there will be an explanation of the characteristics and core concepts of populism in relation to the various approaches.

2.1.1. Definition

Populism, which has been widely used but is often poorly defined, is a contested concept, leading to challenges in accurately understanding and discussing the phenomenon and also challenging to define who qualifies as a populist. It has gained significant attention and analysis in academic literature over the past two decades (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). The growing interest in populism has resulted in the application of various perspectives and approaches from different areas, including sociology, political science, and media studies. Overall, populism functions as a way of identification within a discourse that highlights the authority of the people and the struggle between the “powerful” and “the powerless” (Annovi, 2024). Populist practices arise from the inadequacy of current social and political institutions in maintaining a stable social structure (Baykan, 2023).

Ionescu and Gellner (1969) delve into the complex nature of populism, aiming to determine whether it can be considered a unified concept. The authors thoroughly explore

the idea of populism as an ideology, suggesting that it is a "recurring mindset emerging in various historical and geographical contexts as a consequence of a unique social situation faced by societies in which the middle social elements were either absent or too feeble" (p. 3). Furthermore, they critically examine whether populism can be understood in terms of political psychology or as an anti-phenomenon. Additionally, the study seeks to establish whether populism represents a phenomenon of adoration of the people or if it can be encompassed within nationalism, socialism, and peasantry. The variety of distinct perspectives on populism indicates that there is no single, simple definition of the concept. However, recent scholarly work, such as that of Panizza (2005), suggests that there is a significant level of agreement among academics regarding the core understanding of populism. This view posits that populism is a political phenomenon characterized by its opposition to the existing societal and political structures while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the will and interests of the people.

Mudde (2004) has given the most solid definition of populism as an ideology that posits a fundamental division within society between a homogeneous "pure people" and a "corrupt elite." It asserts that political power should be exercised in accordance with the unified will of the people (p. 543). Taggart (2000) also discusses the significance of the "people" as the idealized community in populism, alongside the hostility towards a constructed "other," as emphasized by Panizza (2005) in relation to the anti-status quo. Taggart (2000) further identifies populism's key characteristic as its aversion to representative politics, viewing it as a means of usurping power from the "people." Hence, an "extreme crisis" in terms of misrepresentation is needed for populism to take root in such representative politics (Taggart, 2002, p. 69).

Providing a systematic understanding of populism requires an assumption that it has its common essence for each and every case. However, as Eric Fassin (2017) noted, not every word has a common essence. The political figures, parties, and even the political strategies that we named as populists in everyday language do not necessarily have a common denominator, even though they show some similarities. Across different cases, such as North and Latin America, Russia, Africa, and Europe, populist regimes show both

similarities and differences (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017). So, studying populism may only be meaningful while considering its social and political context. There are three dimensions that populism differs according to, including social background, general political leaning, and the operational mode (Rucht, 2018). The social profile implies the type of populism, like agrarian or working-class populism. The political views of the populist group also differentiate populism into right-wing or left-wing populism. Together with the third dimension, the locus of control, populism may be characterized as grassroots-based, apparatus-based, and charisma-based in relation to political leaning, which implies the left key category as a class or the right key category as the people (Rucht, 2018). Nevertheless, although there is no common ground, scholars have developed distinct approaches to understanding and studying populism. So, populism should not be treated as a fallacy; it is real, whether it is an ideology, a political style, or a performance. Moreover, it dominates contemporary politics. Hence, it is beneficial to seek analytical precision, to organize the idea of populism systematically, and to place the phenomenon within a comparative historical framework. In a broader sense, populism refers to the people regarding its etymological root, the Latin word “populus” (Rucht, 2018). With respect to this origin, definitions of populism mostly denote a specific kind of group, the homogenous and pure people that is against self-centered and corrupt elite, “the other.”

The definition of populism, according to classical theory, suggests that populism emphasizes the opposition between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). It posits that the people are inherently virtuous and are being exploited or marginalized by self-serving elites (Canovan, 2000). Accordingly, populism's key characteristics are considered to be anti-elitism, direct democracy, and the emphasis on the general will of the people. This perspective conceptualizes populism as a grass-root movement, which refers to mobilizing the people with their own will. However, the elite theory argues that populism is a strategy employed by elites to gain power or maintain their existing position (Mangset et al., 2019). Populists may appeal to the masses to mobilize support against rival elites (Mills, 1956). Such a mobilization is utilized through

manipulating popular sentiments, using populist rhetoric for political gain, and the potential for the co-optation of populist movements by elites (Domhoff, 2018). The elite theory, therefore, is positioned against the classical theory because it suggests that the elite is the mobilizing force of populism, considering populism is a top-down process rather than a grass-roots movement.

Other than classical and elite theory, ideological populism emphasized the role of populist ideologies, such as nationalism, economic populism, and anti-elitism, in shaping populist movements (Mudde, 2007). It defines populism in relation to the adherence to specific populist ideologies, the potential for radicalization and extremism, and the emphasis on cultural or economic grievances (Betz, 2009). Cultural populism, similarly, also emphasizes the role of cultural factors. However, it explains populism issues such as identity, tradition, and belonging rather than political ideologies (Fukuyama, 2018). Considering these theories, which vary in terms of their approach to populism, this study discusses which populism theory can be associated with this process of the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque through the discourses in the reconversion process of Hagia Sophia. The following sections will discuss the political, social, and spatial importance of Hagia Sophia's reconversion process as a case study. In addition, this study aims to reveal the contextual importance of the subject by using the critical discourse analysis. As Fairclough (1995) noted, in critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies, not only linguistic inferences but also the socio-political context of the subject should be included in the analysis. In this way, it is possible to establish the relationships between the analyzed discourses and the context in which they emerged. The following sections will discuss the four different approaches to studying populism, which are discursive, ideational, political-strategic, and performative.

2.1.1.1. The Discursive Approach

Ernesto Laclau's studies on populism form one of the foundations of the discursive approach and are a significant point of reference for current studies on populism (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020). Within his theory of populism, the emphasis is placed on the creation of "the people" as an empty signifier in an antagonistic relationship, where the

people are positioned against a specific "other" such as the political and economic elite, and the existing political establishment (Laclau, 2012). The discursive approach draws on the works of Antonio Gramsci and post-structuralist theories such as Jacques Derrida's concept of the deconstruction. This approach views populism as a discourse that shapes the concept of "the people." Additionally, within the discursive approach, the formation of "the people" is considered not only in populism but integral to politics more broadly (Thomassen, 2024). The concept of populism in discursive theory has become a central point for numerous research on the subject. For instance, Margaret Canovan (1982, p. 544) raised concerns about possibly identifying a universally accepted meaning for the term. However, almost two decades later, she offered a definition of populism that emphasizes its appeal, particularly in a discursive context (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020) suggesting that populism in contemporary democracies is a political strategy that mobilizes the public against both the existing power structure and prevailing cultural values. It often involves a rebellion against the status quo, claiming to represent the interests of the people (Canovan, 1999).

Accordingly, the appeal is provided through political speeches and a discursive agenda of the populist leaders. More importantly, "the people," which is targeted by the populist appeal, is constructed in an opposing relationship with the "other." Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) have also suggested that although there is a significant increase in the number of scholars studying populism, there is still no agreement on the definition of populism within the scholarly community (p. 4). However, most attempts to define populism share common elements with Laclau's discursive theory, excluding its moralizing descriptions: "pure" and "corrupt" (p. 8).

In the discursive approach, discourse encompasses not only words and ideas but also all meaningful practices that shape the identities of individuals and groups by creating conflicts and establishing political boundaries (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020). The aim has never been to resolve these conflicts and contradictions in politics. Instead, it involves temporarily solidifying and establishing a balance of power and perspectives, which may be recognized as the prevailing "common sense" within a community for a period of time

- what is considered normal within the community. Therefore, populism is seen as a specific political logic that is viewed as a normatively desirable outcome in politics rather than as a pathological condition or an authoritarian threat to liberal democratic systems (Peruzzotti, 2019, p. 33-34). It represents politics under exceptional circumstances. Populism constructs a collective subject, namely the people, and it is the general aspect of all politics (Laclau, 2005). It proposes a direct path to comprehending the fundamental nature of politics' ontological structure or "to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (Laclau, 2005, p. 67). Populist reasoning is not distinguishable from other forms of political reasoning; rather, it is a fundamental characteristic of all reasoning. Laclau (2005) here counters the criticisms suggesting that populism is irrational by linking populism and all politics to emotion to explain how populist discourse operates through the emotional connection between the people and a leader. The discursive approach generally employs a deconstructive strategy: it challenges the marginal status of what dominant discourses recognize, flipping the hierarchy and marginality and extending the previously factionalized aspects. This process helps uncover the common characteristics of all political phenomena highlighted by populism (Thomassen, 2024). Hence, the discursive approach is mostly in relation to the narrative processes and politics of emotion. However, more importantly, the main focus is on the oppositional relationship between people and the other. As the empty signifier, people can be mobilized with populist political discourse and is a necessary construction for all kinds of politics.

2.1.1.2. The Ideational Approach

The ideational approach, which reduces populism to an ideological phenomenon, posits that the significance of specific ideas and ideologies, such as those related to nationalism, economic disparity, and anti-elitism, can be observed in the majority of academic studies focusing on the emergence of the first populist movements and in the initial analyses of populism as a broad socio-political concept (Mudde, 2017, p. 48). Within comparative politics, ideational definitions of populism are employed in studies of both European and non-European cases (Mudde, 2017, p. 47). The approach is the most prevalent in current

research. While not all studies explicitly define populism as an ideology, many implicitly rely on this understanding, even if they do not articulate it clearly (Mudde, 2017, p. 46). Before the 1960s, populism was associated with specific political movements. However, since then, scholars have adopted a broader understanding of the term. MacRae's (1969), influential work defined populism as an ideology, and subsequent theorists like Laclau have further developed this concept (Mudde, 2017, p. 47-48). While Laclau avoided the term "ideology," he recognized populism as a distinct political discourse. Other scholars have described it as a language, a mode of identification, or a political frame suggesting that populism is fundamentally about ideas, specifically those related to the people and the elite (Mudde, 2017, p. 48).

Margaret Canovan (1981) outlines the fundamental ideological components of populism, while Cas Mudde (2004) defines it as an ideology that divides society into two distinct and opposing groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." According to this perspective, politics should be a direct expression of the people's general will. This sharp division between "the people" and "the other" is a core belief of both the ideational approach and the discursive theory of populism. Populist ideology centers around four core concepts: ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will. Mudde (2004) and the ideational approach argue that the primary distinction between the people and the elite is based on morality. Both groups are judged based on their purity, authenticity, or corruption. Populism posits that the people are a homogeneous group, while the elite is a self-serving and morally compromised minority that has betrayed the people's interests (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

The ideational approach emphasizes the differentiation between the "people" and the "other," assuming that the concept of a homogenous people is not merely a socio-political construct, as proposed by discursive theory, but rather a tangible and concrete reality. This approach implies an essentialist viewpoint, portraying the "people" as pure and the "other" as corrupt. According to this perspective, populism cannot exist without such a clear-cut distinction. It is regarded as a distinct and separate political ideology, fundamentally divergent from other forms of political thought. Consequently, the ideational approach

facilitates the differentiation between populism and non-populism, providing a framework for the establishment of coherent categories and the definition of populism across diverse contexts, including cross-national and cross-regional scenarios, and can be effectively applied across various levels of analysis.

2.1.1.3. Political-Strategic Approach

According to the political-strategic approach, populism is seen as a specific form of popular mobilization where leaders directly engage with their followers (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). This direct relationship between the leader and the followers arises due to the absence of a relevant formal organization or a deliberate choice to disregard an existing one. The central aspect of populism is the pursuit of winning and exercising power, which is why it's considered a form of personalistic plebiscitary leadership. Dominant politicians constantly seek to gain power and increase their influence by seeking direct, noninstitutionalized support from a broad, diverse, largely unorganized mass of followers (Weyland, 2024). Populism aims for unrestricted authority and relies on quasi-direct, unmediated, and noninstitutionalized mass support. The primary motivation for populism is political rather than ideological. By overlooking the transfer of power from the people to a charismatic leader, definitions focused on discourse and ideology fail to fully capture the essence of populism. Populist politics hinges on powerful individuals and differs from other political strategies or ideologies, which are centered around institutions and have more stable support bases, such as party-based government and military rule (Weyland, 2017). However, the charisma of the populist leader, which forms the primary basis of populism, is not only anti-traditional and anti-rational (Weber, 1978) but also anti-institutional (Weyland, 2017).

The analysis of populism often neglects the essential focus on the political actions and strategies employed by populist leaders to attain and maintain power (Weyland, 2017). Instead of solely scrutinizing their rhetoric, it is crucial to examine their tangible actions. In a populist framework, power is purportedly derived from "the people." However, due to the diverse and amorphous nature of this group, an exceptional leader is tasked with guiding and mobilizing supporters towards objectives that they identify as representing

"the will of the people." Thus, with a prominent leader serving as the cohesive force, the bond with supporters takes on a semi-direct, seemingly intimate nature (Weyland, 2017). This perspective defines populism as a political strategy rather than simply an ideology, with specific approaches and tools for acquiring and exercising power. The populist style encompasses methods for structuring political participation, garnering support, and wielding governmental authority. As new forms of political relationships are established, the leader's personality assumes significant importance. If power stems from direct communication with the people and circumventing established institutional intermediaries, the leader's charisma intensifies and reassures the relationship between leader and followers. Consequently, the populist political strategy manifests as a personalistic style centered around a specific leader within the political arena (Weyland, 2017). Thus, by examining the political actions, corresponding reactions, and subsequent responses, a clearer understanding of the stance and impact of charismatic leaders and their movements can be gained. Therefore, focusing on the political behavior of populists offers a more comprehensive and practical approach than concentrating solely on ideology, discourse, and other ideational aspects.

2.1.1.4. Performative/Socio-Cultural Approach

The prevailing viewpoints on populism generally consider it as a thin ideology, according to scholars such as Mudde (2007) and Müller (2017), or as a strategic approach based on resources and organizational characteristics, as proposed by Weyland (2001, 2017) and Collier & Collier (1991). These perspectives place emphasis on the communicative, stylistic, politico-cultural, and relational elements of populism in their analyses, as highlighted by Ostiguy & Moffitt (2020). Consequently, the socio-cultural approach emerges as a relational way of understanding populism. From this viewpoint, populism can be characterized as a specific form of political connection between political figures and a social base. This connection is shaped and expressed through simple appeals that resonate within certain segments of society due to social, cultural, and historical factors (Ostiguy, 2017). Thus, populism is primarily viewed as a method of engaging in politics, with its ideological aspect being of secondary importance. This perspective underscores

the emotional storytelling of populism and recognizes it as a two-sided phenomenon shaped by the statements made and the bond established between the leader and their followers. This bond encompasses both a socio-cultural and a politico-cultural element (Ostiguy, 2017).

The interaction between political actors and the masses is complex under populism. The process is not just a top-down one in which leaders force their will on the populace. Rather, it functions along a high-low axis that includes the different ways that political players interact with the public. The concept of the "low" in politics serves as the foundation for this performative approach to populism (Ostiguy, 2017). This idea highlights a more individualized, identity-based, and socially charged meaning of "antagonism," which is a key component of many populism definitions, such as Laclau's (2005). The high-low axis includes non-verbal elements including accent, language ability, body language, gestures, and clothing in addition to spoken discourses. These components are intricately linked to a society's past, current group divisions, identities, and grievances; they are not just surface-level components of personal style. They also have a significant influence on the standards used to evaluate a candidate's likeability and moral acceptability. High and low political appeals and viewpoints allow voters to recognize a politician as truly "one of ours" within the framework of preexisting social-cultural identities. Beyond only words, this intricate relationship between political officials and the general public explores the tangible and cultural facets of political participation.

The concept of appeals in politics refers to the deliberate efforts made by politicians or political parties to garner support from the public. These appeals are crucial in shaping the political landscape, with a particular focus on the high-low axis, as highlighted by Westheuser & Ostiguy (2024) (See Fig. 1, p. 16). The success of populist leaders is closely intertwined with the effectiveness of their appeals, as they seek to position themselves as representatives of the marginalized populace against the perceived elite and other social adversaries. This shift in focus emphasizes the importance of understanding not just the beliefs of populist ideology but also how populist appeals function and why they resonate (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024). The sociocultural approach underscores the performative

nature of populist appeals in shaping public perception and forming popular identities (Ostiguy et al., 2020, p. 2). Populism is seen as a particular kind of political appeal, a type of political activity that is mediated by culture and affects how public leaders portray themselves (socio-cultural element). It is also examined as a strategy for using societal divisions to build ties between citizens and politicians (relational element). Populism is, therefore, viewed as a type of political representation that influences political identity and elicits a reaction from the public (performative aspect) (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024).

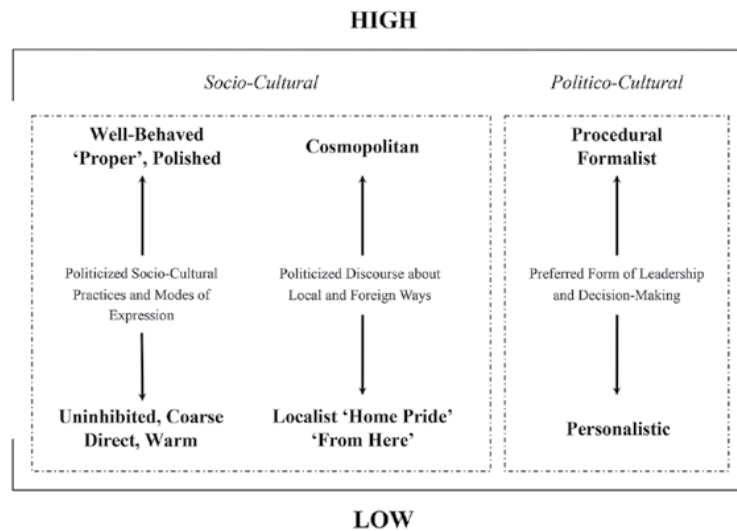


Figure 1: Appeals in high-low axis

(Adapted from Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024)

The socio-cultural dimension delves into the intricate nuances of societal behaviors, encompassing a wide range of aspects such as manners, demeanor, language, attire, vocabulary, and public preferences. On the other hand, the politico-cultural dimension pertains to the various forms of political leadership and the intricate modes of decision-making within the political sphere. Populist politics is characterized by its low positioning on both these dimensions, as populists tend to adopt and exhibit behaviors, language, and leadership styles that resonate with the general public while also emphasizing strong and often personalized leadership (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024). This approach does not disregard the influence of ideological elements or the distinct political style of the populist leader. Rather, it highlights the performative aspect of populism, where explicit and subtle

acts of defiance and intimacy play a pivotal role in creating and perpetuating the unique connections and conflicts that define populism (Ostiguy, 2017). Furthermore, the sociocultural approach does not subscribe to determinism or idealism, as observed in both the discursive and ideational approaches. Instead, it is characterized by its interactive and relational nature, acknowledging the complex interaction between the societal and political factors (Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017).

2.1.1.5. Which Approach to Study Populism?

While all approaches propose different ways of looking at populism, as Ernesto Laclau (2012, p. 145) has warned, populism can vanish if we study it too closely. Similarly, Berlin and colleagues (1968) have suggested that searching for the perfect fit for populism is both illusory and unsatisfying and will not lead to a happy ending. So, we should see the word populism as an instrument to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct different socio-political contexts. It is not a political ideology or regime and does not refer to a movement or program. However, populism generally appears to be attached to other ideological elements, such as left-wing or right-wing populism. It depends on the political environment and background of the given society. Hence, the concepts of populism are interconnected with other ideas, forming interpretive frameworks that may have varying degrees of appeal to different societies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). That is the reason why populism appears differently according to given social and political background throughout history. Every populist movement has its own doxa, which consists of the fixed conception of political normality according to the given socio-historical context (Fitzi, Mackert, & Turner, 2018).

The duty of populism is to form “the people” from a corresponding series of requests and to link, unite, and align those requests that are not acknowledged or resolved by the rulers of the existing establishment (Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017). The construction of the people and the other is the main objective for both discursive and ideological approaches, although their groundings differ. Even in the political/strategic approach where the dichotomy of the people and the other is not clear, reference is made to a majority appealed to by the leader. The appeal, therefore, emerges as a core value of populism in the

performative approach. To define what is appealing to a particular public, however, cannot be acknowledged without considering the conditions of the given time and space. Populists provide both a diagnosis and a series of remedies for specific social issues and problems, which differ from one case to another (Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017). While what is appealing for a particular segment of society is defined according to diagnosis and remedies of the given conditions within the scope of attached ideological elements, that segment is constructed as “the people” with the political narrative of the populist leader. Such an explanation encompasses all approaches and can be a roadmap for understanding populism as a geographically, historically, socio-culturally, and economically based political phenomenon. The underlying ideological differences change the problems that left and right-wing populism are concerned with. The solutions they offer to these problems thus differentiate the segment of society they aim to appeal to. Accordingly, left-wing populism defines the people on a class basis, mostly referring to the poor, while right-wing populism defines the people on a cultural, nativist basis (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). Nativism refers to the belief system that advocates for states to be exclusively populated by members of the native group, known as “the nation.” It also asserts that nonnative elements, including individuals and ideas, pose a fundamental threat to the homogeneous nation-state (Mudde, 2007). Left-wing populists often defend a post-class world, arguing that the people, which mostly correspond to the working class, are sabotaged by the powerful elite, who hold the economic power (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). Therefore, left-wing populism constructs the division between the people and the other according to socioeconomic conditions and mostly offers solutions according to an anti-capitalist political agenda. Right-wing populism, on the other hand, although it also sometimes problematizes economic problems, claims that the political elite is in cooperation with the economic elite and putting their “special interest” above the “general interests” of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). Such a critique is not necessarily anti-capitalist because right-wing populism draws the line between the people and the other in a moralist and sometimes nationalist manner. It accuses the political elite of being corrupted and being a part of a conspiracy against the people. Right-wing populism, when it is completely merged with nationalism, results in xenophobic political rhetoric and

constructs the people as the whole nation. However, even when “the other” is also exclusively native, the right-wing populist discourse mostly accuses them of being agents of alien power (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015). So, especially in the right-wing form, populism appears as an extremely elusive phenomenon (Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017).

Across different cases, right-wing populism seems to be necessarily different and must be approached in a distinct and context-dependent way (Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017). Throughout history, populists in the US typically target wealthy elites, favoring the language of popular sovereignty over class and linking whiteness and independence (Ionesco and Gellner, 1969).

Populist rhetoric is a prominent feature of US politics, evident in the discourse of political candidates, social movements, and extra-institutional formations like economic cooperatives (Grattan, 2016). As Michael Kazin (2016) has argued, US populism is a powerful mode of persuasion that invokes the concept of “the people,” a fundamental principle of American republicanism. This notion of the people, while deeply rooted in the nation's founding, can be subject to reinterpretation and expansion during periods of populist mobilization, leading to shifting boundaries and definitions of who belongs to the category of the people (Kazin, 2016). Latin American populism, on the other hand, is characterized as a political movement that draws support from both the urban working class and the rural peasantry, transcending traditional class divisions (De la Torre, 2017). This populist discourse often emphasizes mass mobilization and charismatic leadership, rather than the institutionalization of democratic norms and the rule of law. Populism in Latin America is not tied to specific socioeconomic conditions, but it tends to flourish in nations with weak institutions and a history of social inequality. In these contexts, the populist appeal to dignity and pride can resonate deeply with marginalized communities (De La Torre, 2017). In the case of Western Europe, issues such as immigration, regionalism, corruption, and European integration have emerged as touchstones for right-wing populism (Taggart, 2017). These issues are framed in populist terms, with the parties using them to mobilize voters and citizens. The focus on these issues helps to understand the underlying populism in Western European politics, although the emphasis on each

issue may vary in different countries (Taggart, 2017). Populism mobilizes globalization "losers" against "winners" through the defense of the nation-state. The same issues can be mobilized by both left-wing and right-wing parties, dividing them along the left-right spectrum. Populism's critique of corruption and unrepresentative elites can be drawn with different connotations by the left and right. Populism reflects structural problems and legitimacy issues in socially and politically pluralist, state-centered, and integrated Europe.

2.1.2. Characteristics and Core Concepts

Evidence consistently demonstrates that the socio-political, geographical, historical, and cultural environment largely influences the rise of populism. However, while there are variations in different scenarios, the fundamental characteristics and principles of right-wing populism, including the distinction between us vs. them, anti-establishment politics, focus on the general will, nationalism, and national heritage, mostly remain constant. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of right-wing populism necessitates a firm grasp of its characteristics and core concepts.

This section will provide the characteristics and the core concepts of right-wing populism, including the people vs. the other, general will, conditions for emergence, the leader, and national heritage. Each subsection will discuss these concepts according to relevant scholars and relation among them.

2.1.2.1. The People vs. The Other

The meaning of "the people" is subject to interpretation, ranging from the entire population of a country to a specific subset. Some view populism as a grassroots movement that empowers the people against elites, while others see it as a top-down manipulation of the masses (Espejo, 2017). Additionally, the concept of "the people" can be exclusive, often excluding marginalized groups or foreigners especially in the case of right-wing populism (Deiwiks, 2009). This fluidity in the definition of "the people" contributes to the challenges in defining populism and identifying commonalities across different populist movements. Different populist cases might have different "people." So,

both the definition and the scope of the term are contextual and might be determined by those who hold political power. The people could have become a particular segment of society that is the supporters of a particular political party or a particular political regime under populist politics, like in Türkiye, as this thesis suggests. However, treating people as a construct, or as Laclau (2006) stated, as an empty signifier, makes populism a powerful political phenomenon.

Different approaches to "people" have led to different conceptualizations. Accordingly, the concept of "the people" can be understood in two ways: as a hypothetical, abstract construct that underpins the legitimacy of the democratic state, and as a historical, contingent political movement that emerges from the demands of specific social groups (Espejo, 2017). Populism can capitalize on both of these understandings. By framing "the people" in a way that resonates with different constituencies, populism can forge a shared identity among diverse groups and mobilize them to support a common cause (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). So, the issue in populism is not to restate any essential or given truth about the people but is the very construction of the people. However, "the people" is most commonly used in three distinct senses: as the sovereign power of a nation-state, as the common people in opposition to the elite, and as a collective national identity (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). All these different meanings are determined by what kind of political agenda populist politics pursues. Moreover, the political agenda itself is crafted in such a way as to include a remedy for discontent and social problems in the existing political system. The meaning/s by which people are defined, therefore, depends on the political discourse that emphasizes the deficits in the existing political establishment and promises to solve them.

A key component of contemporary democracy is the idea of popular sovereignty, or *the people as sovereign*, which holds that the people are the ultimate source of political power. Abraham Lincoln famously said, "government of the people, by the people, for the people." This idea has roots in the American and French Revolutions (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, the idea that the people are the sovereign guarantees and upholds the idea that people determine the rules and decide their own fate. However, a

democratic government does not mean that the divide between the governed and the governors disappears. Therefore, the idea that the people are the sovereign guarantees and supports the idea that people determine the rules and decide their own fate. However, a democratic government does not mean that the divide between the governed and the governors eliminated entirely. Accordingly, there may be a populist struggle and a rise in criticism or rebellion against the current political order in situations when the sovereign people believe that the elites in authority are not speaking for them (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist leaders who pledge to give the people back political power arise precisely in these circumstances.

People who feel that the existing political establishment does not represent them and that they cannot make their voices heard begin to harbor a kind of resentment against existing decision-makers of the political system. Such resentment expresses itself in another notion of the people in populist discourse: *the people as the common people*. Accordingly, the concept of the common people encompasses a broader range of attributes, including socioeconomic status, cultural traditions, and shared values (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This especially stands against the elitist view and the dominant culture, which acts with suspicion toward the judgments, tastes, and values of ordinary citizens and excludes them from power due to their sociocultural and socioeconomic status. Hence, the concept of the common people can both unify a marginalized majority against a perceived enemy and also create divisions based on sociocultural and socioeconomic factors. What unites the people is not only their commonality and ordinary characteristics against the so-called sophisticated elite looking down on the public but also their purity against political and cultural corruption. So, in such cases, populists frequently blend an anti-establishment message with a focus on the people's centrality (Canovan, 1981). The anti-establishment message depicts the political elite as disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens.

Although each notion of the people tries to determine its limits, it is unclear who exactly the concept of people includes or excludes. That is why, just like populism, it is a contested concept by definition. In fact, perhaps the biggest problem in defining populism is that the concept of the people cannot be defined. Similarly, the third notion - the people as the

nation, while seemingly referring to all inhabitants of a territorial community or country, defining the boundaries of a nation can be challenging, especially in the presence of diverse ethnic groups within a single territory. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Moreover, as mentioned above, even if one defines the majority ethnic group as “the people,” in some cases, the political elite also have the same ethnicity. However, they are also defined as “the other.” Therefore, “the people” should be considered merely as a socio-political construct, an empty signifier used to rally populations and give a veneer of legitimacy to populist propaganda. According to this perspective, the political narrative of "the people" is manipulated to make enough individuals think that populism is valid because it supposedly represents them in some manner and creates superficial cohesion to maintain it (Espejo, 2017).

In every instance, populist identification necessitates a perceived completeness of the people, which is inherently incomplete and achieved through the exclusion of an external threat (Panizza, 2005). Populism relies not only on a sense of internal unity but also on the existence of an external enemy, which serves to define the populist identity (Laclau, 2005). So, the populist struggle between “us versus them” consolidates and intensifies the divides between the constitutive identities and sets up new political limits. In populist politics, discourse is often Manichean, dividing the world into an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. The "us" represents the people, while the "them" encompasses all outsiders. Hence, this divisive rhetoric aims to create political polarization (Anselmi, 2017). The critiques of “them” or “the other” define populism, which conceives of power relations as a group of conspiring political groups exploiting the good people (Engelstad et al., 2019). So, while defining the elite within populism, the crucial aspect emerges as morality, which distinguishes between the pure people and the “corrupt other.” The other represents the existing political establishment, one homogenous corrupt group that works against the people's general will. They are the foundations of power, including those who hold leadership positions in politics, economics, media, arts and so on (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The anti-establishment rhetoric of populists attracts widespread support and fuels what is often termed "contentious politics" or "politics of resentment" (Pakulski, 2018).

The resentments that populists have aroused rely on the manipulation of past incidents and strengthened fears of the public. So, the populist discourse against the ruling establishment comes to the scene. The populists' demagoguery is disseminated among the circles of concerned people, both through the media and social media. Although the populist movements vary regarding the issues they publicize, they have an anti-establishment dimension in common, presented as democratic egalitarianism and xenophobic nationalism fixated on opposition to liberal globalization (Pakulski, 2018).

However, defining the role of the other is not limited to explaining it as the constitutive element of the people. The factionalism within the upper class may lead those who are in the position of the most oppressed within the bourgeoisie to support populist politics (Baykan, 2019). From such a perspective, the oppressed segment of the upper class would have the same resentment and suffer from being under-represented. The rise of populism also could be a result of the attitude of the political parties and organizations of the existing establishment. Accordingly, the lack of effectiveness and accountability demonstrated by the conventional political parties and the absence of strong leadership from established political leaders have played a major role in the appeal of populist agendas (Tomšič, 2022). Therefore, the political establishment itself paves the way for populist politicians to make their propaganda, influenced by the public's diminishing trust and less-than-satisfactory performance, particularly during periods of crisis. So, the populist paradox suggests populism both criticizes and relies on elite power, arguing that populism itself is elitist because it calls for a leader to take power and channel the people's will (Engelstad et al., 2019). However, all the above-mentioned arguments are related to the conditions under which populism emerges and the public support that accompanies it. Therefore, to completely analyze the role of "the other" in detail, it is necessary to look at other characteristics and the concepts of populism.

2.1.2.2. General Will

The idea of the "general will" is linked to the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau (1964) believed that a legitimate government reflects the general will, which is distinct from the sum of individual interests. However, because people differ

in their interests, there should be a “common good” in which all of them can agree in principle even though not all wish to pursue it (Grofman & Feld, 1988). Nevertheless, not pursuing the common good does not pit liberty and political authority against each other because the general will of the people establishes the laws that depend on the common good. Therefore, in obeying the law, one only obeys oneself as a political community member. The general will is expressed by the citizens in the process of voting (Rousseau, 1964). People exercise their right to vote in order to reach the common good. Therefore, voting is not the aggregation of the distinct self-interests of the people. Instead, it is a practice of searching for truth. Individuals put forward their ideas about the common good through their own votes and try to achieve it. The decision at the end of the vote is not the sum of the distinct preferences of individuals, but it represents the general will extracted from singularities, so if the decision is contrary to one's perception of the common good, one admits the falsehood (Grofman & Feld, 1988).

Hence, the idea of the common good can make people exist politically only if it makes people exist as singular (Foisneau, 2010). However, singularity does not only refer to an individual being different from all others but also to the fact that this difference, coupled with the sense of common good, is likely to make a nation out of the people. There cannot be a people without a nation, a general will without nor a national will, and national history cannot exist without venerating the key figures of the past or sanctifying its land, and it is the political institutions that produce such a nationalist narrative, and that popularizes the acceptance of the common good to construct the governable people (Foisneau, 2010). Therefore, the generality of people's will depends on the institutions that structure it. However, can general will be governed? In representative politics, a common issue arises once the general will is established assuming that it often deteriorates into a particular will (Foisneau, 2010). This leads to suspicion towards government officials and politicians, as they are often accused of prioritizing their own interests over those of the people. Therefore, there can be no confidence in an unavoidably corrupt political administration; only a direct appeal to the people would be suitable to determine the right course in politics (Foisneau, 2010). However, even though critiques of governmentality of the general will

seem to be populist arguments, what sets populism apart from the existing establishment, which is accused of being corrupt and acting against the interests of the people?

The concept of populism revolves around the idea of the people as a unified entity. This perspective is divided into two main views. The first view, often advocated by populists, emphasizes that the people can only govern themselves effectively by coming together and actively participating in the political process. The second view, in contrast, argues that any specific group or historical struggle can only represent a partial and incomplete version of the people. Consequently, it becomes challenging to determine the exact will of the people and invoking this will may undermine the rights of individuals and minority groups (Espejo, 2017). Both perspectives agree that the people are not simply a group of individuals, but rather an ideal reference point to guide legislative processes. According to the first viewpoint, predominantly held by populists, democratic politics are only legitimate when they align with the will of the people, both as a foundational principle and as a force for revolutionary change. On the other hand, the second viewpoint, supported by liberal constitutionalists and others, contends that referring to "the people" as a substantial entity in the real world poses a threat to the practices and institutions of representative democracy. In recent years, this ongoing debate has been approached through the lens of the "people as a process" perspective. This framework views the people as unified enough to act as the foundation and boundary of the constitutional order, while also being open and complex enough to prevent the monopolization of its will by any single individual or group (Espejo, 2017).

However, the concept of a general will seems problematic because it can be difficult to determine the people's true will, and populist leaders can manipulate the idea to justify their own agenda (Radcliff, 1992), just like the politicians of the existing establishment they accuse. Any populist leader who comes to power with the promise of representing the general will risk engaging in self-interested politics. They often claim to embody the general will, giving them a strong mandate to bypass traditional checks and balances. In other words, since the political promises on which the leader bases populist policies help the leader to gain a pro-people image, it becomes difficult to think that the populist leader

is just as corrupt and self-interested as the accused politicians of the former establishment. This can lead to a concentration of power in the executive branch, weakening democratic institutions (Weyland, 2020). So, the idea of the general will can easily have authoritarian tendencies within populist politics. The focus on a singular general will downplay the rights and interests of minorities because authoritarian populism might restrict freedom of expression or target specific groups deemed to be against the "true will of the people." Moreover, coercive politics may be carried out under the guise of representing the people's general will. Nevertheless, does the populist leader always manipulate the people's general will and produce self-interested policies based on it? Much depends on the conditions under which populism emerges and the personal biography of the leader.

2.1.2.3. Conditions for Emergence

Populist practices often arise when existing social and political institutions fail to maintain a stable social order (Panizza, 2005). Populist language emerges during periods of political unsettlement, de-alignment, and de-structuring, challenging the established political discourse. The populist appeal, thus, aims to reshape the political landscape by redefining the terms of political discourse, forging new social connections, redrawing political boundaries, and constructing new identities. Laclau (2005) argues that such a condition that leads to populist rise includes the plurality of demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them. So, the dislocation of the specific identities whose demands are unmet and their "reconstitution in the imaginary unity of the people" (Panizza, 2005, p. 9) gives rise to populist rupture. However, Laclau's definition of condition to emergence reflects populism as a grass-roots movement. This process transforms the demand holder as an existing political identity and the established order into two antagonistic poles, leading to an "aggregation of discontents that crystallizes in a new popular identity" (Panizza, 2005, p. 10). However, beyond that, populism occurs and operates most radically in which people have certain grievances, desires, needs, and wants, yet they do not really know to name what they are lacking. So, their demands have not been constituted as political demands by their will, but the populist leader or the rhetoric has established them – such an idea suggests that populism is a top-down process in

contrast with its claimed nature (Panizza, 2005). From this point of view, populism again seems to be as elitist and reliant on a leader contrary to being a grass-root movement.

As Howard Gardner (2011) puts it, the leader who will succeed is the one who effectively understands and fulfills the desires of their audience. So, the issue in populism is not to restate any essential or given truth about the people but is the very construction of the people as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005). The concept of the general will of the people can be understood as the relationship between the latent identity that already exists and the politicization of issues, which leads to the emergence of a new representation for those who have historically been marginalized due to their class, religion, ethnicity, or geographical location. Populist leaders often appeal to both those who have never had a voice in the political process and those who have recently lost their political influence. However, populist leadership cannot exist without the successful formation of new identities and a connection with these identities. In both scenarios, new forms of representation have become possible due to the disruptions in the existing political order (Panizza, 2005). From this perspective, populism can be seen as a novel form of representing the dormant identity of the people rather than solely a grassroots movement or a socially constructed political rhetoric. Failures in representation typically occur during periods of political, cultural, social, and economic turmoil, as these are the times when previously stable relationships of representation and subordination are disrupted, giving rise to new forms of identification. According to Panizza (2005), there are some specific circumstances in which relations of representation become dislocated. One of the most salient factors is the erosion of trust in traditional political systems. In times of crisis, the inability of established political elites to effectively address societal challenges can lead to a breakdown of societal cohesion. This loss of faith can manifest in a voter's preference for candidates who position themselves as outsiders, detached from the perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of the political establishment. Furthermore, the fatigue with established political norms and the tarnishing of political groups through accusations of misconduct or corruption have contributed to a growing cynicism towards traditional politics. This disillusionment has given rise to a phenomenon often referred to

as "anti-politics," where politicians and political factions are viewed as hostile to the interests of the people.

The broader societal and economic transformations of recent decades have also played a significant role in shaping the political landscape. Urbanization, economic modernization, and demographic shifts have led to new social and political realities. Globalization and migration have further complicated these dynamics, creating new challenges and opportunities for political engagement. In response to these changes, alternative forms of political representation have emerged outside the established political system. These may include social movements, online platforms, and other grassroots initiatives that provide opportunities for citizens to engage in political discourse and action beyond the traditional electoral process.

However, while these above-mentioned conditions may create a favorable political environment for populism to emerge and come to power, this is not necessarily the case. Political and economic crises can result in various outcomes beyond populist politics, including the rise of authoritarian governments, military dictatorships, or the reform of political institutions. Populism is not merely a reaction to political turmoil; rather, it is an inherent aspect of the political process, stemming from the disconnect between political leaders and the general populace. It highlights the challenges faced by political entities in effectively bridging this divide. During times of representation crises, new forms of identification can emerge, aiming to narrow the gap between representatives and the represented in the name of the people. Populist leaders often argue that genuine representation of the people is only achievable through their leadership, drawing on historical and political narratives to support this claim. These narratives often criticize the established political system for the ongoing crises while being rooted in the historical grievances and resentment of individuals who have felt misrepresented or entirely excluded from the political process. Therefore, the rhetoric employed by populist leaders is as significant as the socio-economic and political conditions in shaping the emergence and ascent of populism.

2.1.2.4. The Leader

Is the existence of a populist leader an essential element of the concept of populism? In some cases, populist parties seem to have survived even after the death of their leader (Panizza, 2005). However, the leader's figure still constitutes a story, a myth that binds the party together. Indeed, it is the relation between the leader and their followers that gives populist politics a distinct mode of identification. Populism studies often associate populist politics with charismatic leadership, but the concept of charisma itself is elusive and poorly defined. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of charismatic leadership in explaining the appeal of populist leaders, but others have questioned the usefulness of this concept. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2014) point out, the vagueness of the term "charismatic leader" makes it difficult to subject this explanation to empirical testing. Unless we can provide a clear and precise definition of charisma, it becomes circular reasoning to argue that charismatic leaders are the primary driver of populist support.

Arguably, Eatwell (2003) highlighted the significant impact of charismatic leaders on the emergence of populism, particularly right-wing populism. The direct appeal of these leaders to voters is often cited as a contributing factor. However, there is debate regarding whether charismatic leaders are the sole cause of emergent populism. Van der Brug and Mughan (2007) argue that the attribution of charisma may only occur once the leader has achieved some level of success at the polls. It is noteworthy that many political leaders tend to present themselves as strong leaders; however, populist strongmen take this a step further by crafting an image of a decisive individual who prioritizes action over rhetoric. They are portrayed as unafraid to make tough and quick decisions based on "common sense" solutions, even if they go against "expert" advice (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). One defining characteristic of populist leaders is their emphasis on transparent and easily understandable proposed solutions to political problems. If solutions are not easily comprehensible, they are likely to be rejected by populists. Furthermore, populists often view the involvement of experts or the complexity of public policy as indicative of a "self-serving racket perpetuated by professional politicians" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6). This

negative connotation associated with populism can be attributed to the oversimplification of complex issues such as unemployment, health, or economic prosperity. Populists tend to oversimplify these problems, which may lead to unrealistic or ineffective solutions (Deiwiks, 2009).

Where does the charisma come from? According to Weberian understanding, charismatic leadership is about a specific bond between leader and followers, which is defined at least as much by the followers' expectations and perceptions as by the leader's individual characteristics (Weber, 1978). Therefore, the emergence of a charismatic leader depends on specific conditions and relations. It makes no sense to look for certain universal features of charisma (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Moreover, as Ann Ruth Willner (1984) argues, charisma is not an intrinsic quality of the leader but rather a perception held by the followers. It is the followers' responses to the leader that determine whether a charismatic relationship exists between the leader and the people. Hence, to understand charisma, we must focus on the perceptions and reactions of the followers, not on the leader's inherent qualities (Willner, 1984). By setting aside the leader's personal characteristics, such an understanding points out that charisma is entirely constructed by the followers and attributed to a person in a specific political relationship. Therefore, in contrast to the idea of an inherent charisma, a populist leader often comes from a humble background and rises to power through hard work and determination. This shared experience fosters a connection with the people. For a charismatic relationship to develop, two conditions must be met: (1) followers must believe that the leader is on a special mission and possesses unique qualities or abilities, and (2) followers must accept the leader's authority without question (McDonnell, 2017).

The concept of the leader serves as a symbol that carries multiple layers of meaning, as Goyvaerts and colleagues (2024) highlighted. It functions as an enigma that holds the promise of reconciling diverse factions within a society. In essence, populism can be redefined as a process that revolves around the act of naming, which ultimately determines the identity of "the people." The charismatic leader becomes the embodiment of this identity, filling the symbolic void through which collective identification takes place.

When considering the portrayal of political institutions such as parties as obstacles to direct popular sovereignty, it becomes evident why charismatic and populist leaders are tempted to exploit the perceived gap between "the people" and the established political order (Deiwiks, 2009). Therefore, the existence of "the people" and the charisma of the populist leader are intertwined, forming a specific political relationship during the process of populist naming. Moreover, the naming process is heavily influenced by the unique context of the political and social landscape, allowing the leader to craft narratives about the sovereign identity of the people and those who oppose them. These narratives are integral to shaping the dynamics of the populist movement and its interactions with the broader political establishment.

As individuals connect with a leader, they do so through the narratives that are conveyed not only through words, but also through symbols, including the leader's physical presence and personal experiences. These stories enable people to make sense of their past, understand their current situation, and envision a path towards a better future. The impact of a leader's appeal ultimately hinges on the specific story they convey or embody, as well as the audience's reception of that narrative (Panizza, 2005). It's important to note that the process of identification is not a one-way street where the leader simply influences a passive audience. The audience is not a blank slate waiting for a story to be imposed upon them. Instead, the stories told by the leader must compete with numerous other existing narratives. For new stories to succeed, they must either supplant, suppress, complement, or outweigh earlier narratives, as well as contemporary oppositional counter-stories. This dynamic is further complicated by the proliferation of media, which has expanded the opportunities for populist leaders to promote themselves and extend their influence. The political arena has increasingly shifted to television and radio, a trend often referred to as the "mediatization of politics" (Mazzoleni et al., 2003).

A common strategy employed by populist leaders is to position themselves as outsiders to the political establishment. They often claim to be different from traditional politicians, arguing that they are not part of the corrupt elite (Panizza, 2005). By discursively placing themselves outside the established political system, the leader seems to directly engage

with the public (without any intermediary) or their people. So, they are “one of the boys,” as they relate to “the common people” and use simple and even vulgar language (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The leader’s position within or outside the political realm is crucial for articulating populist discourse. The narrative of populism, which articulates various myths, symbols, and ideological themes, is often in relation to historical arguments, especially in the cases of right-wing populism. Historical discourse is used to inflame nationalist sentiments and sometimes to revive past resentment and anger against the established political system. Moreover, the emphasis on national heritage ossifies xenophobia and anti-minority sentiments in resorting to nativist discourses. Hence, it is important to understand heritage politics in the populist narrative .

2.1.2.5. National Heritage

Populism frequently leverages national heritage as a strategic tool to mobilize support and construct a simplified political narrative. By selectively emphasizing specific elements of a nation's past, populist movements can craft a romanticized vision of a bygone era, contrasting it with a perceived present-day decline. This strategy is instrumental in creating a sense of collective victimhood and fostering resentment towards both domestic and foreign "elites" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Moreover, by appropriating symbols and traditions, populist actors can position themselves as the authentic defenders of the nation, thereby undermining the legitimacy of established political institutions. However, such a selective and instrumentalized approach to heritage can distort historical realities and contribute to social divisions (Robertson & Webster, 2017). Populist movements frequently employ a selective and idealized interpretation of national heritage to reinforce their political agendas. By constructing a monolithic and homogeneous image of the past, they often overlook or actively suppress marginalized groups and perspectives, contributing to eroding historical accuracy and public discourse. This strategy is particularly effective in creating a sense of cultural threat, as populist narratives frequently depict contemporary challenges as attacks on the nation's core values. Furthermore, by framing heritage as a static and unchanging entity, populist actors can delegitimize efforts to address social and economic inequalities, presenting them as threats to the nation's

identity. This approach to heritage can ultimately lead to a "loss of diversity and unity" within societies (Kaya, 2021).

By constructing a monolithic and idealized vision of the past, these movements often overlook or actively suppress the contributions of minority groups, creating a false sense of cultural homogeneity. This exclusionary approach to heritage is closely linked to the politics of fear, as populist narratives frequently portray contemporary challenges as threats to the nation's "authentic" identity. Thus, populist actors exploit heritage to mobilize support and delegitimize political opponents, ultimately undermining efforts to build inclusive and diverse societies. The selective appropriation of heritage can profoundly affect social cohesion and democratic processes (Kaya, 2021). Political discourses centered on national heritage are pivotal in consolidating power for populist regimes. By crafting a narrative that positions the regime as the sole guardian of the nation's cultural and historical identity, populists can mobilize support, delegitimize opposition, and reinforce their authoritarian tendencies.

One key strategy is constructing a mythical past, often characterized by homogeneity, unity, and greatness. By evoking this idealized golden age, populists can create a sense of crisis and decline, blaming external forces or internal enemies for the nation's current predicament. This narrative not only justifies the regime's authoritarian measures but also fosters a climate of fear and intolerance towards dissent. Populism thrives on creating an "us versus them" mentality, with the populist leader positioned as the sole defender of the nation's core values (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Furthermore, the instrumentalization of heritage can be used to suppress opposition and consolidate power. By defining what constitutes "authentic" national heritage, populist regimes can marginalize and silence dissenting voices, effectively limiting political pluralism. This process can lead to a "loss of diversity and unity" within societies (Kaya, 2021). Controlling cultural institutions and narratives is essential for populist power consolidation. By appointing loyalists to key positions in museums, historical societies, and media outlets, populist regimes can shape the public's understanding of the past and present. This manipulation of information allows them to reinforce their own legitimacy while discrediting opponents, further

solidifying their grip on power. In conclusion, the strategic use of national heritage is a core component of populist regimes' power consolidation strategies. By constructing a mythical past, marginalizing dissent, and controlling cultural institutions, populists can effectively manipulate public opinion and suppress opposition, ultimately strengthening their authoritarian rule.

Even though the concept of populism prevails as a contested phenomenon and has no solid definition, the above-mentioned characteristics may be counted as common characteristics of populism across different cases and examples. With respect to the scope of the current thesis, the aim is to explore these characteristics within the context of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into the mosque. The reconversion resembles all characteristics of the "us vs. them" narrative, anti-establishment politics, appeal to common people, binary thinking, national heritage, and charismatic leadership to a certain extent.

2.2. Populist Strategies and Their Impact on Politics

Populist strategies are characterized by the use of persuasive tactics that emphasize the threat to the ordinary people from various out-groups, such as political elites and immigrants (Corbu et al., 2019). These strategies often involve taking control of state institutions, building personal relationships with voters, and exploiting divisions between the people and a corrupt elite (Jenkins, 2023). Populist rhetoric is also influenced by local factors, with candidates using more populist appeals in areas with higher levels of economic insecurity and political uncertainty. Furthermore, populism is shown to be a common feature of presidential politics, particularly among political challengers and those with outsider status (Bonikowski, 2016). These strategies significantly impact politics, as they can persuade voters, mobilize action, and influence the outcome of elections.

The rise of populist movements, usually due to social and economic problems, builds its basic policy on the axis of appealing to the people. Populist leaders often ground their legitimacy in the democratic principle of popular sovereignty (Canovan, 2002, p. 25). They argue that the established political system has become unresponsive to the will of the people and must be returned to popular control. Thus, unlike the self-interested and corrupt officials of the traditional system, populist leaders often articulate a perspective

from the grassroots, highlighting issues that resonate with the public but have been overlooked by existing decision-makers (Canovan, 2002, p. 27). The politicians, all save themselves, even politics itself, are not dedicated to the struggle against what they perceive as threats to the interests of the people. So, the concept of “unpolitics” in relation to the populism, which is used by Taggart (2018) to unpack some aspects of populism, refers to the unsettling of the existing political norms, ideas, and rules.

The current perception of politics and political parties as divisive institutions has led to calls for their elimination or purification to promote unity among the people. Many believe that established institutions, parties, and politicians who claim to represent the populace actually stifle the voices they are supposed to champion, ultimately betraying the trust of their followers. In contrast, populist leaders assert that they have a direct connection with the people, enabling them to pursue the interests of the public without being beholden to the influence of the powerful. However, this raises the question of how one can engage in discussions about politics while simultaneously condemning it as a corrupt game. Populist leaders often reshape political discourse by emphasizing moral values and employing universal dichotomies such as good versus evil and moral versus corrupt. As a result, these moral distinctions take precedence over the traditional political and ideological divisions, shaping the political landscape in new and complex ways.

Populism seeks unseemly in the established political order, relishing in its defiance of norms. Consequently, it is both disruptive and triumphant in its impact on its adversaries, effectively grouping all opponents together. By compelling opponents to challenge populism on two fronts – by refuting its policies/issues/stances and simultaneously upholding the norms being disregarded in presenting these stances – populism blurs the distinctions between opposing factions while highlighting its own divergence from this inaccurately amalgamated opposition. Thus, the binary worldview arises in Manichaen’s sense. The political often involves a degree of intensity in terms of association or dissociation. In this context, the political becomes divorced from any specific state, organization, or group. It transcends traditional political boundaries, focusing solely on the distinction between “us” and “them.” Politics, therefore, is the construction among

“us,” who have the will to establish political unity. The will of the people also indicates the boundary between us and outsiders. Anyone outside the boundaries of this will is reduced into one homogenizing group: them.

The pathology of populist politics is indistinguishable from the paradox of representative democracy. The contradiction within this democratic paradox lies in the tension bringing the people into politics, which means creating ways for their concerns to influence the political process and taking politics to the people by enabling them to form a clear and compelling understanding of it. It is the problem of the location of power. While the main democratic promise is widening the political arena for all voices from the entire population, it can result in challenges to form such a clear understanding of where the political power lies. In such a political paradox, the ideology plays the role of closing the gap to reduce the complexity of politics to dogmatic simplicity (Canovan, 2002, p. 26). However, the democratic ideology, consistently supported by politicians and the media, contains populist elements that contradict the present direction of democratic politics. It emphasizes the importance of sovereignty and the expression of consensus over the willingness to compromise and adapt, unity among the people over diversity, the majority over minority groups, and straightforwardness and openness over sophisticated and detailed processes. Hence, paradoxically, while democracy, with its promise of inclusivity, must be understandable to the masses, the ideology that aims to bridge the gap between the people and politics often misrepresents the complexities of democratic processes. This discrepancy between ideal and reality provides fertile ground for populists, who can exploit this gap by claiming that democracy has been betrayed and rallying discontent under the banner of restoring power to the people (Canovan, 2002, p. 27).

Representative democracy establishes institutions, organizations, and associations (like political parties, elections, and the parliament) for public policy-making. Populism possesses a fundamental doubt regarding these mechanisms of representative politics and political elites who are the decision-makers in the process of policy-making and has attempted in various forms to establish alternative methods of direct democracy, grassroots bottom-up collaborative democracy, or, on the opposite end, authoritarian leadership

(Taggart, 2002, p. 74-75) Therefore, the effect of populism on representative politics refers to the failings of representativeness. So, despite representative democracy's claim of "the people," populism transforms the relationship between the established system's politicians and the people by pitting them against each other (Taggart, 2002, p. 75).

Populism, a political phenomenon often characterized by a strong emphasis on the "people" versus the "elite," has significantly shaped political discourse in Türkiye. Taggart (2002) identifies three primary ways in which populism influences political discussion: it simplifies politics, reinstates popular sovereignty as a central value, and introduces a binary division. In Türkiye, the historical center-periphery cleavages rooted in the Ottoman Empire have provided fertile ground for populist politics (Elçi, 2022). The mistrust between the ruling center and the ruled periphery, exacerbated by the modernization attempts and top-down processes of the republican regime, has deepened the distinction between the two. This has created an environment ripe for populist leaders to structure political debate in the three ways outlined by Taggart (2002).

The Justice and Development Party (JDP) era in Türkiye offers a compelling case study of populism's influence on political discourse. Following chapter explores how the JDP has utilized populist strategies to simplify politics, reinstate popular sovereignty, and introduce a binary division in the political arena in Türkiye. One of the ways the JDP has simplified politics is by framing issues in stark terms, often pitting "the people" against a perceived "other." This has been particularly evident in the party's rhetoric regarding the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, a highly contentious issue with deep historical and religious significance. The JDP has presented the reconversion as a matter of national pride and popular sovereignty, contrasting it with the those who oppose it.

Furthermore, the JDP has reinforced the concept of popular sovereignty through its emphasis on direct democracy and its appeal to the "will of the people." The party has often framed its policies as reflecting the desires of the majority, even when faced with significant opposition. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia was presented as a clear example of the people's will, with the JDP claiming that the overwhelming public support for the move justified its decision. Finally, the JDP has introduced a binary division into the

political arena, often portraying its opponents as corrupt, elitist, and anti-democratic. This has helped to mobilize support for the party and to delegitimize its critics. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia has been a key example of this strategy, with the JDP framing the issue as a choice between national pride against a perceived "foreign agenda." Overall, the JDP era in Türkiye offers a clear illustration of how populism can shape political discourse. By simplifying politics, reinstating popular sovereignty, and introducing a binary division, the JDP has been able to mobilize support and advance its agenda, particularly in relation to highly contentious issues such as the reconversion of Hagia Sophia.

CHAPTER III

POPULISM AND JDP

3.1. The Roots and the Rise of JDP's Populism

Historically, populist movements in Türkiye have capitalized on the fundamental division between the culturally varied "periphery" and the ruling elites of the "center," which includes the bureaucracy, state-dependent industries, and universities (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). Voters' self-positioning along the left-right ideological spectrum reflects this divide, with religion at the periphery and moderate ideals at the middle. As representatives of the periphery, right-wing parties that prioritize Islamism and nationalist conservatism include the Democrat Party and the Justice Party (Kaya, 2020). The Justice and Development Party (JDP), founded in 2001 and led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has inherited these populist traits from this legacy (Kaya, 2020). The party came to power as a single-party government in 2002 and has used populist strategies to create a divide between privileged elites and deprived ordinary people, relying on illiberal institutions and practices inherited from the previous regime (Özpek & Yaşar, 2020).

The popularity immediately gained by JDP after its establishment relied on its anti-elitist, anti-Kemalist, and anti-corruption discourse and was reinforced with a strong Islamist, neo-Ottomanist, and, surprisingly, at the same time, Europeanist attitude (Kaya, 2020; Baykan, 2018). That was a strong match with the time's political, cultural, and economic conditions in Türkiye. The conservative politics of the JDP played a crucial role in harmonizing religiousness with rights and freedoms and integrating Islam, liberty, and diversity (Baykan, 2018). After Türkiye's economic liberalization in the 1980s, 2001 was

the year of financial crisis, not only in Türkiye but also all over the world. Consequently, Türkiye's economy has gone from quasi-liberal to fully neo-liberal (Kaya, 2020). During this financial crisis and inflation period, society was also politically restless. Then Prime Minister Ecevit and the coalition governments that preceded him failed to provide political stability in the eyes of the public, and trust in political institutions and individuals gradually declined. In such a political climate, JDP, which positioned itself as a center-right and conservative party advocating for democratic reforms and economic stability, won the 2002 general election as a single party and formed a new government.

JDP's success in the 2002 general election was based on economic stability, sociocultural demands, and religious resentments. Its entrusted heritage, which was from the remnants of banned political parties with Islamist roots, and its founding members, many of whom had experienced political marginalization due to their religious backgrounds, successfully tapped into the frustrations of a significant portion of the population in Türkiye (Baykan, 2018). Therefore, the rise of the JDP in Türkiye can be attributed to a combination of domestic and international factors, including political, economic, and social developments (Theodorou, 2022). By accusing previous governments of being elitist, alien to the people, prohibitionist, and corrupt, the JDP presented itself as people-centered, from within the people by promises of transparency, accountability, and an end to corruption, appealing to a diverse demographic encompassing conservative Muslims, nationalists, and even some liberals disenchanted with the established political order (Elçi, 2022).

JDP's political standing was both conservative and liberal because the party's political discourse not only had its roots in nationalist conservatism and Islamism but also included a commitment to satisfy international financial institutions (Öniş, 2012). Therefore, the JDP's classification as a conservative democratic party enables its leadership to maintain its Islamic political origins while also creating connections with both international and domestic authorities (Kardaş, 2008; Duran, 2008, Yıldız, 2007). Moreover, the party held an emancipatory view on the issue of exercising religion against the policies of the former government and demanded social justice.

The leadership of JDP demonstrated their commitment to religious principles in their daily lives, and this was also evident in their pro-Islamist approach to addressing the people's desire for increased religious freedoms to fulfill certain Islamic obligations that were currently restricted by laws and practices (Kardaş, 2008). For example, The JDP addressed the issue of headscarf-wearing students being banned from entering universities and granted freedom of education to Prayer Leader and Preacher School graduates, allowing them to continue their education in universities (Cizre, 2008).

The JDP takes a non-statist Muslim democratic stance, prioritizing democratizing state power over seizing it. Their goal is to establish a democratically structured state apparatus to provide a secure living space for Muslims socio-culturally and economically (Yıldız, 2007). Initially, the support for the JDP and Erdoğan mostly came from the society's religious, poor, and unorganized segments, yet due to the low trust in the existing political establishment and institutions, Erdoğan had a great advantage in direct engagement with the public and for personal mobilization, and over time, the JDP electorate has become heterogeneous (Kaya, 2020). That was the inevitable emergence of right-wing populist politics in Türkiye. The JDP and Erdoğan have emerged at a crucial juncture in politics in Türkiye at a time of deep crises causing a breakdown between citizens and their representatives. The JDP has reconstructed the main political discourse by emphasizing the power and will of the common people against the secular policies of the Kemalist regime, accused of being misrepresentative and elitist.

3.2. JDP's Utilization of Populist Discourse and Policies

Studying the period of JDP's rise to power through the lens of populism allows one to evaluate basic claims about the nature of populism. On the one hand, discontent and the anti-establishment discourse propose that the success of any populist claim depends on its outsider status within the existing political arena (Brubaker, 2017), and on the other, populism's possible function to distort and redefine some foundations of a democratic government can both be traced in the case of Türkiye (Demiryol, 2020). Additionally, the attraction of the case of Türkiye for studies of populism is that a party with a populist agenda, JDP, has long been the incumbent party in Türkiye (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019).

Referring to the anti-establishment discourse, JDP criticizes the Kemalist regime, arguing that it suffered from two ideational and one methodological problem. These included the idea of nation-statehood, which was accused of being exclusionary and authoritarian; the idea of secularism, which was portrayed as exclusionary and class-based; and the methodology used to interpret the framework of nation-state and secularism, which was seen as restricting political inclusion of certain (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). It was suggested that withdrawing the military from politics would increase democratic quality, but this also has not happened due to the authoritarian and revisionist policies of the JDP (Özpek & Yaşar, 2020). However, JDP's populist discourse relying on foreign powers as scapegoats, has successfully masked domestic problems and foreign policy failures. This has enabled the party to maintain its popularity despite corruption allegations, a declining economy, and failures in foreign policy (Bulut & Hacıoğlu, 2021).

JDP's ascendancy to power was closely tied to a strategic and successful deployment of populist politics. The JDP has come to power as a conservative-democratic party, promising expanded freedom of expression, the repeal of anti-terrorism laws that criminalized speech deemed harmful to state unity, the abolition of the death penalty, the promotion of Kurdish language education and broadcasting, and closer ties with the European Union (Cizre, 2008, p. 2). However, its political discourse also includes criticism of bureaucratic oligarchy within the judiciary and the state, and a representation of the "nation" against perceived minority groups and privileged classes (Baykan, 2018). Accordingly, the JDP has accused the existing regime of being biased and disrespectful to individuals from lower-income, conservative, and rural communities, "those who were looked down on, those whose sense of the divine was ridiculed, those who were otherized, and the oppressed" and portrayed Erdoğan as the "man of the people" coming from those segments of the society (Aslan, 2021, p. 8). By employing such a populist discourse, the JDP positioned itself as the voice of the common people against an allegedly corrupt, elitist, and secular establishment. The party adeptly tapped into the collective grievances of various social groups, promising to challenge the status quo and address their concerns. By framing themselves as champions of the ordinary citizen and using straightforward

language, the JDP consolidated its political base and paved the way for a sustained presence in politics in Türkiye (Baykan, 2018). This populist approach has played a pivotal role in shaping the party's image and influencing policies during its tenure in power.

The party's success has been further bolstered by its adoption of a focus on neo-Ottoman nostalgia and the politicization of emotion, as well as a strategy of concentrating power in the hands of the executive branch (Theodorou, 2022; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). Accordingly, populists use emotional appeals to mobilize support, relying on direct representation and appealing to feelings of love and compassion for their leader and anger and contempt for the opposition (Aslan, 2021). Employing a strong anti-elitist discourse since its foundation in 2001, claiming the victimhood of the majority at the hands of a repressive, secular, and Western-oriented minority, the JDP has emphasized the resentments and grievances of the majority. Erdoğan's "public tears," emotional statements on the media, serve to emphasize the moral divide between the people and the elite and the threat and crisis rhetoric central to populist discourse (Aslan, 2021). On the other hand, weeping in public also serves to dramatize the basic components of the populist discourse and consolidate identity and solidarity. Public crying has been seen as a sign of authenticity and sincerity, making the populist discourse more believable, as well as consolidating identity, mobilizing support, and evoking feelings of anger and revenge (Aslan, 2021). Therefore, the performative element of populism expresses itself as an emotional means to appeal to the public, in the case of JDP. The message of closeness has been used to justify authoritarian practices, and this emotional appeal has divided society further, leading to political polarization (Aslan, 2021).

The JDP's populism-in-power has reconfigured political institutions in Türkiye, resulting in an authoritarian regime with competitive elections (Sözen, 2020). This has raised concerns about the party's impact on democracy and the ability of citizens to hold rulers accountable (Sözen, 2020). So, despite its electoral victories, the JDP has not democratized Türkiye but instead relied on it. Its populism has been extended through Meso-level actors, such as media platforms, to shape relations between the state/party and

society by portraying a harmonized view of the people and demonizing the opponents, contributing to societal polarization (Demiryol, 2020). So, Erdoğan's political leadership style and discourse have been characterized by an anti-establishment, anti-elite, plebiscitary understanding of democracy and an "us vs. others mentality. Therefore, the JDP's populism has been based on both inclusionary and exclusionary definitions of people. Erdoğan's leadership in times of crisis has been characterized by an organic relationship with the masses, deepening existing divisions, demonizing internal and external enemies, and creating a political and historical mission (Demiryol, 2020). To construct "other" within both the domestic and international arena, Erdoğan's rhetoric on the relationships with the EU, as well as the rights of the Kurdish and Alevi people, has also been shifted (Usul, 2007).

In times of economic, political, or social crises, such as the Occupygezi movement of the summer of 2013, which was a social movement against the authoritarian regime of the government, Erdoğan and the JDP leadership use conspiracy theories to deflect the causes of problems without taking any responsibility or being held accountable (Kaya, 2020). They argue that rival international powers such as the EU, the US, Russia, and "international interest lobbies" have set up these movements. Additionally, the JDP has implemented a highly polarizing form of government by dividing society along a religious-secular axis, especially after 2013 (Kaya, 2020). The party's long-term appeal is attributed to its anti-pluralist ideas and the use of dependent organizations to shape extra-legislative fields (Yabancı, 2016). This populist approach is also evident in the party's foreign policy, characterized by a revisionist tone and a shift towards authoritarianism and Islamism (Özpek & Park, 2019). The JDP's utilization of populist politics is evident in its political storytelling and public communication, which includes appealing to the population through a revival of neo-Ottoman sentiments (Theodorou, 2022).

The JDP's appeal to the public mainly relied on "conservative democracy", introduced by the JDP elite referring to the Kemalist political establishment, comprising the Republican People's Party (RPP) and the secularist military, bureaucracy, and judiciary (Aslan, 2021). The main political discourse has referred to Kemalist modernization as despotic,

oppressive, forced, homogenizing, a proclamation from above, and social engineering (Kaya, 2020). Therefore, victimization and appropriation of Islamist values, so-called marginalized by the secular policies of the Kemalist regime, have been the prevailing policy. The nostalgia produced by JDP has been the core of the dominant populist rhetoric, so the Ottoman past of the Türkiye has been occasionally revitalized. Especially, the Ottomanist discourse of tolerance against the Kemalist regime, accused of being oppressive, was appreciated. However, the politics of so-called tolerance and claim for democracy did not have any better treatment for minorities; rather, this time, Sunni-Muslim-Turkish citizens, who fit the JDP's definition of the nation, were prioritized (Kaya, 2020).

The restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2007) has been reflected in the various attempts of the JDP to restore a neo-Ottomanist understanding of the nation (Kaya, 2020). Restorative nostalgia involves historical revivalism at the state level, including reconstructing historical monuments to evoke the national past and future and alternative mythmaking against the existing political establishment. It is based on two main plots: the restoration of origins and conspiracy theories. The conspiratorial thinking leads to a simple premodern conceptualization of “good” and “evil” and fosters the Manichean battle between the two. However, such a premodern perspective simplifies and undermines the complexity, variety, and specificity of the current problems – be they political, social, cultural, or economic. Furthermore, it also reduces modern history into some kind of “fulfillment of ancient prophecy” (Boym, 2007). This perspective leads to a politics that favors constant backward-looking policy making, restoration, and even re-establishment of the past. So, understandably, right-wing populist governments widely adopt political discourses around restorative nostalgia.

Regarding the case of JDP in Türkiye, the effort to restore the Ottoman past is crystallized in the myth-making process that is an alternative to the Kemalist narrative of the blessed republic (Kaya, 2020). Myth-making is particularly evident in the construction of new national days, promoted to ensure that neo-Ottomanist, Islamist, and conservative values replace the Kemalist, laicist, and militarist narrative inherited by the republic. Instead of

the republican days such as 19 May, 30 August, and 23 April, the JDP elite emphasizes the celebrations and commemorations of alternative historical dates such as 29 May (Istanbul's Conquest Day in 1453) and 15 July (the failed coup attempt against the JDP government in 2016). The commemorations mainly emphasize the nation of Islam and the Ottoman imperial legacy rather than Turkish nationalism (Kaya, 2020). So, the JDP has adopted heritage populism in a neo-Ottomanist and Islamist sense by fostering religious nationalism.

Mainstream politics in Türkiye is divided between two groups with different social origins and cultural attitudes, reflecting their interpretations of Türkiye's imperial past (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024). The JDP, which came to power in 2002, initially presented itself as a populist and progressive party, aiming to reconnect the state with the nation and represent the Muslim masses. The JDP utilized a neo-Ottomanist narrative to reshape society in Türkiye, incorporating Ottoman history into school curricula and promoting Ottoman nostalgia. Following domestic and regional challenges, such as the Arab Spring and the 2016 coup attempt, the JDP has become increasingly authoritarian and has distanced itself from liberal and leftist groups, relying on a populist and anti-Western discourse that appeals to Islamists and conservative nationalists (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024). Among all its populist policies such as the accusation of the existing political system as being against the will of the people and portraying Erdoğan as an outsider of the political system coming from the low segments of the society, JDP's instrumentalization of the discourse on national heritage to appeal to the people's past resentment against the Kemalist regime and to embody anti-establishment policies has a special meaning for this thesis because the reconversion of Hagia Sophia was precisely the concretization of the restorative nostalgia.

3.3. Analysis of the JDP's Populism in Relation to Hagia Sophia's Reconversion

The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a church to a mosque, then a museum, and back to a mosque demonstrates the shifting power dynamics surrounding the building (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024). Space is always social and political (Elden, 2007), shaped by state institutions, and influenced by the perceptions and actions of social groups (Lefebvre,

1974). The meaning and function of a space, like Hagia Sophia, therefore, can evolve as it is experienced and interpreted by different people. This is precisely because the social relations mirror space's actual uses and experiences (Elden, 2007). They are "lived spaces" (Lefebvre, 1976). In other words, social relations are only real through their spatial and historical qualifications. The spatial is shaped by historical and social factors, and these three elements - the social, the spatial, and the temporal - are interconnected and influence one another (Elden, 2007).

However, the process of shaping space cannot be separated from politics and, therefore, the state power. According to Lefebvre (1976), the state, as a product of a specific territory, often reinterprets and transforms its historical context. Consequently, space becomes a political artifact, shaped by state strategies of administration, repression, and control. The creation of abstract space not only alters political practices and institutions but also reshapes political imagination. It involves novel ways of envisioning and conceptualizing the spaces where everyday life and state actions occur. However, state interventions are often spatially selective, focusing on specific places, scales, and territories (Brenner & Elden, 2009). In the disturbance of connections between people, groups, social classes, and classes, the State often enforces its own logic, utilizing space as its primary instrument (Lefebvre, 1976) to enhance political domination.

The built environment, reinforcing existing power structures by favoring certain groups over others is a powerful tool for shaping social and political dynamics (Bierema, 2023, p. 68) Within the power structures, those who are excluded from these spaces often resist and try to redefine their purpose and this struggle can mirror populist politics, as some people attempt to control public spaces while others fight against this control (Bierema, 2023, p. 73) The way public spaces are policed reveals the power imbalances and can lead to feelings of resentment among those who feel marginalized. Ultimately, while populist politics shapes the built environment, the built environment also shapes the subjects in it so that it forms the populist politics in turn (Bierema, 2023, p. 73). In other words, the built environment in the populist politics has a crucial role in shaping our sense of belonging and identity, as well as the political landscape. The historical sites, which are

used to construct a national identity and memory, are also politically built environments like the Hagia Sophia, emphasizing the Ottoman heritage and promoting a neo-Ottomanist ideology (Aykaç, 2019).

From its construction until the end of the Ottoman Empire, Hagia Sophia was associated with political sovereignty and religion, and after the establishment of the Republic, the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1934 reflected the secular identity of the new Republic of Türkiye (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024). However, in 2020, it was officially reconverted into a mosque again. This reconversion was a part of the “Islamization process” of public sphere by the ruling JDP (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024, p. 5). The decision has received international criticism from organizations such as UNESCO and religious leaders like the Pope and the Russian Orthodox Church (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2023, p. 11). The state authorities in Türkiye have emphasized that the reconversion is a domestic issue and a matter of national sovereignty however, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia was a symbolic attempt by the JDP to increase its prestige and Türkiye’s regional profile during domestic and regional challenges (Öztiğ & Adısönmez, 2024). It represented an important moment for Erdoğan and the JDP, who had campaigned and promised the reconversion (Konakçı, 2023).

Distinct dynamics of the reconversion reflect the different elements of populism. Firstly, the anti-establishment politics has been embodied by the political motivation that legitimizes the necessity of the reconversion, which is the JDP government’s positioning against the Kemalist doctrine that turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum to portray Türkiye as a secular nation-state and disassociate from the imperial past. Religious symbolism, which is an element of religious populism, has been reflected by the mobilization of conservative groups because it is a key example of the party’s use of Islamic populism and religious grievances to consolidate power (Konakçı, 2023). This move, which sought to appeal to the emotions of the “repressed people” and legitimize the party’s vision, was particularly effective in the urban spaces of Türkiye (Sofos, 2021). It also reflects the JDP’s broader shift towards right-wing, religiously legitimated populism, which has eroded democratic institutions and principles (Rogenhofer, 2018).

The popularity and support that the reconversion has aroused have been achieved through direct engagement with the public through channels like social media (Aslan, 2021). Despite international opposition claiming that the issue of reconversion was an attempt by the government to shift the current political agenda, a significant portion of the population in Türkiye supported the reconversion, highlighting the complex and divisive nature of the issue. This has reflected consolidating political power and giving a political message to the voters that the JDP has been continuing to be the voice of the people. This message includes the discourses of national pride, and the public has perceived the reconversion as a matter of sovereignty due to the statements of Erdoğan and other pro-JDP politicians, claiming that the international forces were against the reconversion with the intention of interfering with Türkiye's domestic affairs.

The 1934 decree that turned Hagia Sophia into a museum needs to be understood in the context of the ontological insecurity felt by the architects of the Republic of Türkiye after World War I. They were anxious about the effectiveness and survival of their state in a rapidly changing world and saw the Western world as a model for emulation. Converting Hagia Sophia into a museum was a way for them to dissociate the new state from its imperial predecessor and steer Türkiye towards modernity (Sofos, 2021). The new status of Hagia Sophia symbolized the “othering” of the Ottoman past, and secularism played a key role in this process. Hagia Sophia's status as a museum became a central issue for conservative Islamists and nationalists, who viewed it as a denial of Islam's historical significance and superiority. The passion surrounding Hagia Sophia fueled the demand for its reopening as a mosque, particularly among religious and nationalist groups. However, it was only after the rise of the JDP and its divisive rhetoric that the issue gained widespread public attention and became a focal point of campaigns and legal challenges (Sofos, 2021).

The decision of the Council of State on July 10, 2020, turned Hagia Sophia into a stage for emotions and televised events. While the supporters of the government celebrated the decision, the opposition, except for the pro-Kurdish HDP, mostly chose not to make the mosque reconversion a point of contention (Sofos, 2021, p. 8). The conversion of Hagia

Sophia back into a mosque was perceived as a reaffirmation of popular sovereignty and a statement to those that promote division (Sofos, 2021). Political motives influence President Erdoğan's approach to the Hagia Sophia situation. He has successfully manipulated divides within Türkiye's body politics among his compatriots through using urban space to appeal to emotions and orchestrate vindication and popular validation rituals (Sofos, 2021, p. 9). He has preserved a divided political environment, positioning Kemalism and its extremes as the contrasting force that allows him to rally his varied base. The decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia into a mosque was a strategy to galvanize his supporters and assert his authority over the matter of sovereignty (Sofos, 2021).

Türkiye's decision to re-designate the Hagia Sophia as a mosque in July 2020 sparked controversy and divided the country along party lines. The move was celebrated by conservative Islamists who saw it as a symbol of their suppressed identity under the secular regime. The main opposition parties questioned the decision but did not directly condemn it other than the MPs from Peoples's Democratic Party. The reconversion also was seen as a political strategy of the JDP, to reconsolidate its political power due to the mishandling of the pandemic (Konakçı, 2023). In a time of strict policies for the quarantine and the vaccination, the reconversion was brought to agenda with the rhetoric of the "*milli irade*" (national will). Such an act reflects the was necessary for JDP to reassert its pro-people stance at a time when government policies were prohibitive and repressive. Therefore, the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque was seen as a political decision rather than a legal one (Taş, 2022). Nevertheless, the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia has revealed the importance of materiality in heritage-making processes, and interventions to monuments are still a major aspect of this process, especially in the populist politics (Aykaç, 2019).

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims first to briefly explain the qualitative research in general and the case study in particular, as the design of the study in the first section. Then, the second section will introduce the “Critical Discourse Analysis” (CDA) as the method of the textual analysis of the selected materials. CDA’s theoretical roots and key principles will be presented.

Secondly, this chapter will clarify the research question and the objectives of the study in the third section by clearly articulating the scope and subject matter. It will also underline the selection criteria of the selected materials for the textual analysis. In this regard, the third section includes the role of parliamentary sessions and the politicians’ speeches on media in the production of political discourse. Therefore, it will be justified why the selected materials provide a meaningful sample for the textual analysis. The processes of gathering and analyzing the data will be explained to evoke a clear frame in the reader's mind. Plus, the researcher's reflexivity and the study's limitations will also be provided in the third section for the relevance of the scope in which research results may be evaluated.

4.1. The Qualitative Research

Qualitative research commences with presuppositions, a worldview, the potential application of a theoretical framework, and the examination of research issues delving into the significance that individuals or groups attribute to social or human problems (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Its methods rely on diverse designs, text and image data, and unique steps in data analysis. Qualitative research is facilitated in times of requirement for

a problem or an issue that needs to be explored. Such exploration is also needed to study a group or population whose voices are silenced or an issue that remains implicit. Therefore, the understanding of a problem that is provided by qualitative research becomes mostly complex and detailed. It can empower individuals and minimize the power relationship between the researcher and the participants of the given study. It ensures a deep understanding of the contexts or settings that a specific problem or issue addresses. Therefore, the qualitative research has an explanatory nature rather than being descriptive. It provides a detailed analysis of and beyond the general picture of trends, associations, and relationships.

The fundamental characteristics of a qualitative study include conducting research in a natural setting, utilizing the researcher as a primary tool, gathering data from multiple sources, and employing inductive and deductive data analysis while focusing on the participants' interpretations, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account (Creswell, 2013). These distinguishing characteristics set qualitative studies apart from quantitative ones. Qualitative studies usually gather data outside of a laboratory and typically do not involve instruments such as scales or questionnaire results that are administered to study participants. The researcher plays a distinctive role in a qualitative study, from designing the study to gathering and analyzing data. Therefore, reflexivity is an essential aspect of qualitative studies, prompting researchers to reflect on their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences, which can influence their interpretations, including the themes they develop and the meaning they attribute to the data.

Differentiating between various qualitative research designs involves subtle variations in data collection, analysis, and writing procedures, going beyond their general characteristics. Numerous designs can be identified, including 28 approaches as outlined by Tesch (1990), 22 types in Wolcott's (2009) tree, and the five traditions of qualitative inquiry established by Creswell (2013). Accordingly, these five traditions encompass narrative research, phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research process progresses from philosophical assumptions to worldviews and through a theoretical lens, thus providing a framework for approaching

inquiry procedures. In the current study, I have adopted John W. Creswell's case study design to show how right-wing populism can be traced through the projection from the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into the mosque, with all symbolic and cultural meanings in it.

4.1.1. The Case Study

Examining a specific problem through one or more cases within a predetermined framework is the case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 73). Some scholars describe case study research as an inquiry strategy, methodology, or an overall research framework, while Stake (1995) contends that it is more of a decision about what to study (i.e., a case within a defined system) than a methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). As a methodology, it is an object of study, a product of inquiry, and a particular design within qualitative research. Through thorough, in-depth data collection from multiple sources, this method allows researchers to investigate a defined system (a case) or multiple systems (cases) over time, producing in-depth case descriptions and thematic insights (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 73).

The size of the bounded case, such as whether the research involves one event, multiple events, a program, or an activity, distinguishes different types of qualitative case studies (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 74). The purpose of the case analysis also distinguishes between different kinds of case studies. Whether a case study is intrinsic, instrumental, or communal, it is different (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 74). An intrinsic case study is one in which the researcher is interested in a given example, not to learn about other cases or a general issue, but to learn about that specific situation (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 74). However, when a broader comprehension is required, the researcher uses an instrumental approach to study a specific example in order to achieve a different goal than comprehending the case in question (Stake, 1995). In each type, the selection of cases is not similar to the sampling research, for example, in the intrinsic case study, the case is pre-selected whereas in the instrumental one, some cases would do a better job than others (Stake, 1995, p. 3). To select the case, the researcher should prioritize the maximization of what they can learn as well as they need to pick cases that are easy to get to and

hospitable to inquiry. The main aim of the case study is particularization, not generalization (Stake, 1995, p. 7) meaning the researcher takes a particular case and comes to know it well, not primarily as to how it differs from others but what it is and what it does. The case study research emphasizes understanding the unique characteristics of a specific case. While acknowledging differences between cases, the primary focus is on comprehending the individual case itself. Qualitative case researchers strive to preserve multiple perspectives and acknowledge the diverse and often contradictory viewpoints of both the researcher and the participants (Stake, 1995, p. 8).

To conduct a qualitative case study, a researcher must first determine if this approach is suitable for the research question (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Case studies are particularly appropriate when investigating well-defined cases and aiming to provide an in-depth understanding or comparison. The researcher must then identify the specific case(s) of interest, which could be an individual, a group, a program, an event, or an activity (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Data collection for case studies is typically extensive, drawing from multiple sources such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Stake, 1995, p. 51; Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 74). Data analysis can take various forms, including holistic analysis of the entire case or focused analysis of specific aspects. Through detailed description and thematic analysis, researchers can uncover the complexity of the case. The final interpretive phase involves drawing meaning from the case study. This might involve learning about a particular issue or understanding a unique situation (Stake, 1995, p. 3). As Lincoln and Guba suggest (1985), this phase is about extracting the "lessons learned" from the case.

Data collection methods are simply observation, interviews, and document review. Among them, gathering data through document analysis is akin to observation and interviewing. By demonstrating interest in various documents, the researcher encourages others to contribute relevant materials. These documents can include newspaper stories and social media material. A single-instrument case study in qualitative research, also known as single-case research, is a method that focuses on the in-depth analysis of a single individual or event (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is particularly useful for

exploring unique or unexpected phenomena, prompting further research and questioning of current practices. It allows for a detailed examination of individual characteristics and their context, providing a clear and comprehensive understanding (Repko et al., 2011). Despite its perceived limitations in rigor, comparability, and replicability, the single case study remains a valuable method in social science research, particularly for analyzing how individuals frame and address challenges (Barzelay, 1993).

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The political discourse analysis examines the relationship between language and politics, encompassing both the language used in political contexts and the language of political actors (Kampf, 2015). It involves the practical analysis of political text and talk, including political interviews, parliamentary language, and politicians' speeches (Tian, 2006). Political discourse analysis (PDA) is closely related to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on discursive practices' social and political functions in public discourses. According to critical discourse analysis, discourse is a form of social action and interaction (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Boden & Zimmennan, 1991; Van Dijk, 1985). The way dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk is studied through the CDA (Van Dijk, 2015). So, the focus of the CDA is the linguistic form of domination of oppression (Fairclough, 1995). Accordingly, power is conceptualized both according to inequalities between the participants of discursive events and to unequal proportion of control over the production, distribution, and consumption of the text in particular sociocultural contexts (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1-2)

The “criticality” of critical discourse analysis is that it does not merely describe the structure of the discourse but tries to interpret and explain it in terms of the properties of social interaction, especially of social structure. It focuses on the relations of power while addressing the discursive nature of social action, ideology, and the link between society and text (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). The framing of critical discourse analysis studies has its roots in Western Marxism and its key figures in twentieth-century social and political thought like Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School (including Jürgen Habermas), and Louis Althusser (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Especially the works of

Gramsci and Althusser inspire critical discourse analysis in the sense that the reproduction of hegemony, ideology, power, and capitalist social relations within the practices of ordinary life (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Understanding discourse in critical discourse analysis necessitates involving the social conditions of production and interpretation (Fairclough, 1989). The dialectical-relational approach suggests that social conditions are influenced by three interconnected levels: the immediate social context, the broader institutional framework, and the overall societal structure (See Fig. 2, same page below). Hence, a thorough analysis of the discourse as “social practice” involves examining the text itself, the production and interpretation processes related to the text, and the relationship between the text, these processes, and their social contexts, encompassing both the immediate situational conditions and the broader institutional and social structures (Fairclough, 1989).

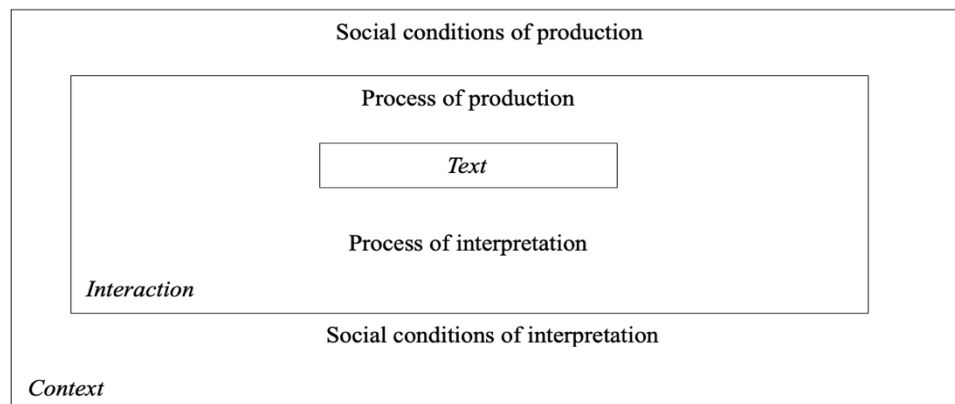


Figure 2: Three-dimensional model of discourse

(Adapted from Fairclough, 1989)

Accordingly, the focus of critical discourse analysis is the three dimensions of the discourse, consisting of text, interaction (or discourse practices of production and interpretation), and context (or sociocultural practice) (Fairclough, 1989; 2013). So, the three dimensions of the discourse correspond to the three stages of the CDA (See Fig. 3, p. 58).

- The descriptive dimension, as the first stage of the CDA, is concerned with the formal qualities of the text.
- The interpretative stage focuses on the relationship between the production and interpretation of the discourse.
- The explanatory critique deals with the relationship between the discursive practice and the social reality.

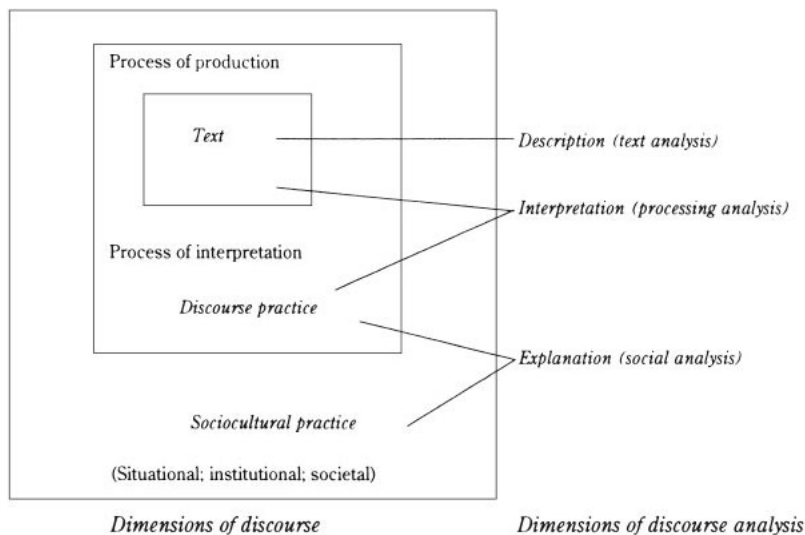


Figure 3: Three-dimensional method of CDA

(Adapted from Fairclough, 2013)

CDA suggests that how a text is produced or interpreted is influenced by the social and cultural context in which it occurs. This includes the dominant social practices and relations of power of the social reality. The way a text is produced shapes the text itself and leaves signs in the way it looks. How a text is interpreted decides how its appearance will be understood (Fairclough, 2013).

Examining political discourse through the lens of critical discourse analysis entails a detailed investigation of how language and communication serve to both uphold and challenge existing structures of political power. This analytical approach seeks to uncover the ways in which political narratives are constructed, disseminated, and contested in society, revealing the underlying power dynamics at play. Political discourse analysis

(PDA) also characterizes the political discourse as attached to political actors such as politicians, citizens, and political institutions engaged in *contextual* political processes and events (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Yet, to conceptualize political discourse, it is necessary to define what politics are. According to Isabela and Norman Fairclough (2012), “politics is about arriving *cooperatively* at decisions about what to do in the context of disagreement, conflict of interests, and values, power inequalities, uncertainty” (p. 236, emphasis added). Such an understanding induces a conceptualization of the political discourse as argumentative and deliberative.

Chilton (2004) asserts that political actors are fixated on "legitimization" in political contexts (p. 199). To put it another way, they utilize political rhetoric to defend their policies or actions based on people's ideas of what is right and bad. Thus, political speech aims to establish a shared understanding of what is good against evil, useful versus destructive, and right versus unjust. Nonetheless, political engagement include citizens, voters, social movement members, protesters, and dissenters (Verba et al., 1993). Therefore, these groups, individuals, organizations, and institutions play a role in the political process and engage in political discourse. This means that political participation extends beyond just politicians. In political communication events, the public, citizens, the people, the "masses," and other groups emerge as the active recipients from an interactional perspective (Van Dijk, 1997). Therefore, the domain of politics cannot be conceptualized as a form of top-down process according to the political discourse's “critical, argumentative, and deliberative nature” (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

As a particularly important genre in political discourse, deliberation leads PDA to analyze discursive representations as “constitutive elements of arguments” (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 241), and therefore, analysis of the discourse should be integrated with the analysis of the genres, which are “the use of language associated with a particular social activity” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 211). However, political genres are constrained by the social construction of the political field, which is open to various interpretations. To address this, innovative political work often takes place within major political speeches. This involves "politicizing" certain issues, framing them as subjects for political debate,

and "depoliticizing" others, removing them from the political agenda (Fairclough, 2006). This reflects one of the main elements of CDA, recontextualization, that transformation of meanings through decontextualization (taking meanings out of their contexts) and recontextualization (putting meanings in new contexts)." (Fairclough, 2013, p. 175). Thus, studying political discourse through the lenses of CDA requires selection criteria based on the deliberative genre of the text, discourse practice (interaction), and sociocultural practice (context).

4.3. The Study

4.3.1. The Research Question and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to critically evaluate the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque within the context of right-wing populism in contemporary Türkiye. In this regard, the main research question is as follows: How does JDP employ populist strategies related to reconverting Hagia Sophia? In relation to the research question, this study will search for an answer to the following sub-questions: What was the role of the political discourse in shaping perceptions and reactions to the Hagia Sophia's reconversion, and how does this intersect with populist messaging? What was the extent of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, which reflects broader debates about secularism, religious identity, and national heritage preservation in contemporary Türkiye? So, the study aims to analyze the relationship between the scholarly approaches to populism and the ongoing populist policies in Türkiye with the projections of these relationships in the Hagia Sophia case. In this framework, prominent concepts of populism, the distinction between "the people and the other," general will, anti-establishment politics, charismatic leadership, and national heritage are problematized through the reconversion of Hagia Sophia.

4.3.2. The Selection of Materials in Relation to Critical Discourse Analysis

For the textual analysis, the two sources of data have been chosen. As the first source, the parliamentary sessions consist of speeches given by the MPs in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye. The second source is the textual and verbal material from the media, which involves statements by various politicians and ministers, including President

Erdoğan, from three online media sources that are TRT, Yeni Şafak, and Türkiye. All material from both sources was selected from the period between June 1, 2020, and September 15, 2020, the most intense period of debate on the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into the mosque.

The common feature of political speeches from both sources is their generic character. According to Fairclough (2006), the political speeches often share some generic features as follows: (1) An appeal to a legitimate power source, such as God, or a nation which is portrayed as inherently good, (2) an appeal to the historical importance of a given culture, to evoke a sense of shared identity and pride, (3) the construction of the “other” as evil, like terrorist groups or political oppositions, and (4) emphasizing the need for collective action and solidarity against the constructed other.

These features, as identified by Fairclough (2006), provide insight into the common elements found in political speeches across different sources. However, both sources have different roles in the production of the dominant political discourse. Parliamentary debates, influenced by the participants' understanding of parliamentary procedures, party politics, current social events, and other MPs, (Van Dijk, 2003) can significantly shape public perception of political issues. Accordingly, parliaments are institutions where legislative proposals are debated and government actions are scrutinized. They provide a platform for government officials to explain and justify their policies. Parliamentary discourse, a specialized form of political language, represents the most formal and institutionalized aspect of political communication (Bayley et al., 2004).

Studying parliamentary speeches allows us to explore the political culture of representation in a given society. Furthermore, political representation occurs in the arena of discussion and debate; parliamentary discourse culminates in tangible action in the external world by setting rules for what must, may, and may not be done. Parliament is the scene of a contest over meanings, and its structure is typically confrontational (Bayley et al., 2004). Therefore, for this study, textual analysis of the parliamentary speeches is meaningful to understand how the government constructs the populist discourse on the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, how it reconstructs “the people” through political

representation, and the struggle between the power and opposition discourse in this area. Understanding the production and reproduction of the political culture of representation through hegemonic political discourse in parliament is important in explaining how different themes of populist politics are utilized in the case of Hagia Sophia.

The analysis of the media, one of the most influential instruments for disseminating populist messaging, provides discursive resources that can be seen as an authoritative voice (Busch, 2006). In relation to politics, media holds a sort of monopoly on the means of production and distribution of information. So, the political actors develop their political strategies and adopt a style according to the expectations of the public. The key components of the media discourse involve text, which tells the story, the process of the production of the text, and audience alignments. Although this study is interested in the text of the speeches, audience alignment has become a topic that is especially emphasized in social media analyses (Cotter, 2015).

Media texts are particularly important in terms of their functions in what Fairclough calls "genre chains," referring to the channels in which meanings are moved and transformed (2013, p. 173-74). The recontextualization occurs through these chains as it attaches to social fields like media. Accordingly, the chain that regularly connects important government statements of publications, press conferences and/or press statements, and news reports would be an example of a genre chain (Fairclough, 2013). Furthermore, the media encompasses a collection of related recontextualizing ideas due to its variety of formats, including print, broadcast, and electronic. These ideas are realized in genres, which are "systematically distributed forms of control" and are thought of as regulating tools (Fairclough, 2013, p. 179).

Therefore, politicians' media statements, especially of those from the JDP or pro-JDP like the Nationalist Movement Party, reflect the distributed forms of control over the case of reconversion of Hagia Sophia. The politicians adjust their gestures, tone of voice, and rhetoric as if they are directly in contact with the people and ensure the populist appeal. The meaning of the reconversion is decontextualized and recontextualized in media discourse through the genre chain. Hence, analyzing the political discourse on media is

important and required to provide a comprehensive account of utilizing populist politics through reconversion. Three media sources, TRT News, Yeni Şafak, and Türkiye, were selected based on the criteria that they are all known pro-government organizations, and they have had an intensive bulletin on the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia as well. So, the genre chain and the recontextualization of the meaning will be traced through the data derived from these sources.

4.3.3. Processes of Gathering and Analyzing Data

The data collection mostly involves a thematic search through the various texts online. The parliamentary speeches have been selected from the parliamentary minutes available on the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye website. The keyword “Hagia Sophia” was searched through the proceedings published between June 01, 2020 – September 15, 2020, and speeches that include the keyword were selected for the analysis. In total, textual analysis was conducted through 64 parliamentary speeches from 18 parliamentary minutes. Plus, news that was published during the same dates and comprised politicians’ speeches about the reconversion of Hagia Sophia was selected from TRT News and newspapers Yeni Şafak and Türkiye. In total, 50 speeches from the news were selected and analyzed. When the news consisting of the same speeches from the three sources was repetitive, they were compared, and only one of them was selected for the analysis.

The coding and the analysis of the selected materials were conducted via MAXQDA24. Open coding was performed on the data from two sources, both separately and combined. After the coding, the analysis of the data provided the thematic clusters according to the alignment of the related themes. Three dimensions of the political discourse, text, interaction, and context were explored in relation to the thematic clusters through critical discourse analysis.

4.3.4. Research Limitations and Reflexivity of the Researcher

The study mainly has two major limitations, one is theoretical, and the other is methodological. The theoretical limitation is mostly due to taking statements of “Kemalist regime,” “Kemalist establishment,” and “Kemalist doctrine” as the one homogenous

entity, as claimed by the JDP, while there is no Kemalism as such, just like populism. However, because the scope of this study is related to the JDP's populist discourse, as the ruling party in Türkiye, the relations between the JDP and the "other" have mostly been analyzed through the text and talk of the politicians from JDP or pro-JDP parties. Hence, the results of the study are only meaningful when concerning the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia as the symbolization of the JDP and Erdoğan's stance in populist politics. The methodological limitation of the study also deals with the same issue because the applied critical discourse analysis does not include the emancipatory direction, the final stage of the relational-dialectical approach of Fairclough. Although the data reflects most of the political narrative in relation to the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia since the study is about problematizing how the JDP utilized populist policies in Türkiye, the analysis mostly has included the ruling party politicians' talks on the issue. The text and talk from the oppositional political parties were only occasionally included, both because the selected media platforms, TRT News, Yeni Şafak and Türkiye, did not give them much space and because there was indeed a lack of oppositional discourse on the issue of the reconversion. However, while this lack of oppositional discourse raises the need to problematize how and to what extent JDP controls political discourse around populist policies, it is beyond the scope of this study.

The study also has my unique interpretations of the political text and talk, as I have a critical perspective on the issue of Hagia Sophia's reconversion. In the analysis, my interpretation is positioning as "members' resources (MR)," Fairclough explains as what "people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts – including their knowledge of the language, representations of the natural and social world they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions and so on" (1989, p. 24). The discourse analysis, therefore, includes the reflexive thoughts of my own, as well as their relations with the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER V

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SPEECHES

This chapter presents the textual analysis of selected parliamentary speeches and politicians' expressions that have been covered by conservative media outlets including TRT News, Yeni Şafak, and Türkiye. Each section provides textual analysis applied to parliamentary speeches and politicians' speeches, and two of them combined, including a general introduction, discursive selectivities regarding identified themes, and alignment of those related themes observed in the texts. (See Fig. 4, same page below).

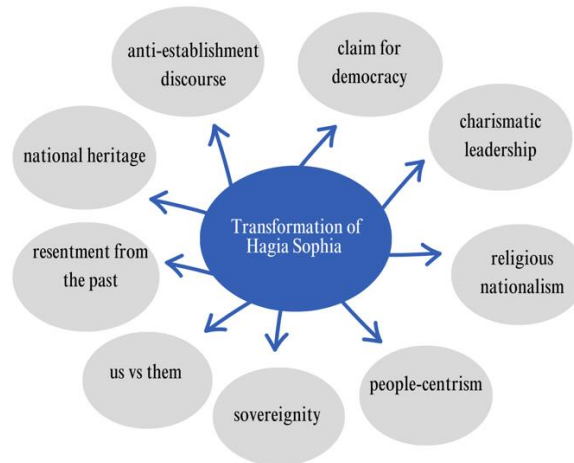


Figure 4: The themes gathered through CDA

5.1. Data Analysis and Main Findings

5.1.1. Dynamics of Discourse in the Case of Reconversion of Hagia Sophia

In relation to their communicative situation, the text and talk on the issue of Hagia Sophia are utilized through the genres of political discourse specific to the processes of production and interpretation in a particular social or institutional context. As mentioned above, the parliamentary debates on the reconversion of Hagia Sophia have discursively produced and reproduced the political power in such a communicative situation, which is constructed and controlled by MPs through their roles, knowledge, and purposes. On the other hand, politicians' speeches in the media have transformed and recontextualized the meaning of the reconversion through genre chains, such as press releases and broadcasts reflecting the systematic distribution of control.

Table 1: The features of descriptive analysis

Dimensions of meaning	Values of features	Structural effects
Contents	Experiential	Knowledge/beliefs
Relations	Relational	Social relations
Subjects	Expressive	Social identities

(Adapted by Fairclough, 1989)

The descriptive analysis of the text and talk will be presented with the dimensions of meaning, values of features, and structural effects (See, Tbl. 1, same page above). The interpretation and the explanation will be conducted according to the contents, subjects, and relations described by the first stage of the analysis. The connections that display the discourse's role in the content in relation to the subjects' interaction (See Fig. 5, p. 67) will be discussed through the explanatory analysis in accordance with the determinants and effects.

The social order at the top of the situational context reflects the societal dynamics of Türkiye at the time of the reconversion. Accordingly, the reconversion took place in the eighteenth year of the JDP government during the period of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crises. In the institutional setting, JDP's vote rates have been low due to unemployment issues and the mishandling of the pandemic (Konakçı, 2023). In such an

environment, as a populist party, JDP has adopted identity politics (institutional social order) for electoral consolidation (situational setting) and brought reconversion to the agenda (situation) that had previously been declared as unnecessary by President Erdoğan himself (Konakçı, 2023). Such a situational context has produced the relationship between elements of the situation and the discourse type, which will be presented through the textual analysis of the thematic clusters.

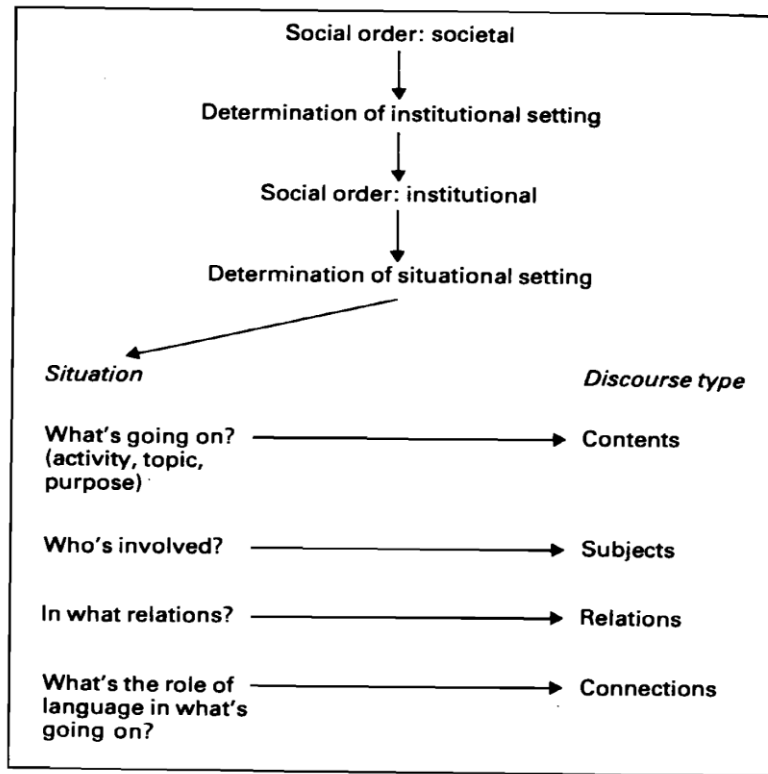


Figure 5: Situational context and discourse type
(Adapted from Fairclough, 1989).

The social order at the top of the situational context reflects the societal dynamics of Türkiye at the time of the reconversion. Accordingly, the reconversion took place in the eighteenth year of the JDP government during the period of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crises. In the institutional setting, JDP's vote rates have been low due to unemployment issues and the mishandling of the pandemic (Konakçı, 2023). In such an environment, as a populist party, JDP has adopted identity politics (institutional social order) for electoral consolidation (situational setting) and brought reconversion to the

context and the text produced. The situational context of the time of reconversion included social and economic crises in relation to the coronavirus pandemic, the ongoing populist politics of the JDP, the party’s aims for electoral consolidation, and the reproduction of political power through the identity formation of the public with their leader (See Fig. 7, same page below). The text and talk obtained from the parliamentary and media speeches were analyzed through content, subjects, and the relations among those subjects.

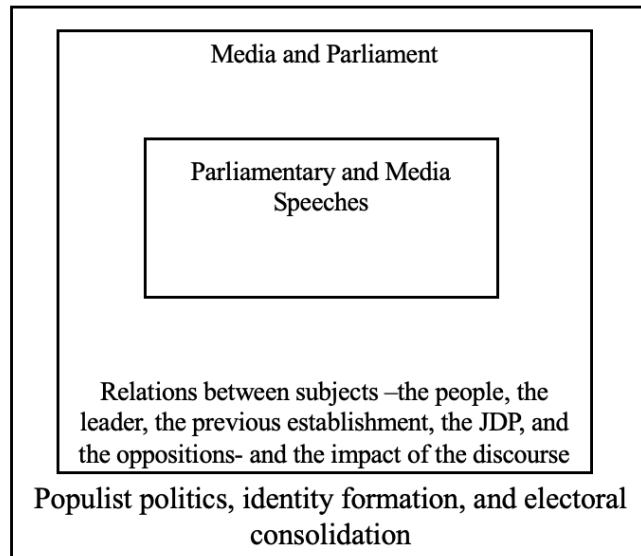


Figure 7: Three-dimensional model of discourse in the case of reconversion

5.1.2. The Themes

The descriptive analysis of the speeches has revealed that the frequencies of the nine themes are diverse in relation to the semantics and rewording and overwording of the vocabulary (See, Tbl. 2, p. 69-70). This section will provide an explanation of the themes according to the descriptive and interpretative characteristics of the text and talk.

Table 2: The code system and frequencies

Code System	Frequency
Code System	399
national heritage	54
charismatic leadership	36
religious nationalism	32

people-centrism	43
sovereignty	58
us vs. them	51
resentment from the past	39
anti-establishment discourse	46
claim for democracy	40

The thematic frequencies in populist speeches are not random but rather reflect deliberate choices made by the political figures. Concerning the strategic use of their meanings, the themes are more or less aligned with each other (See Fig. 8, same page below).

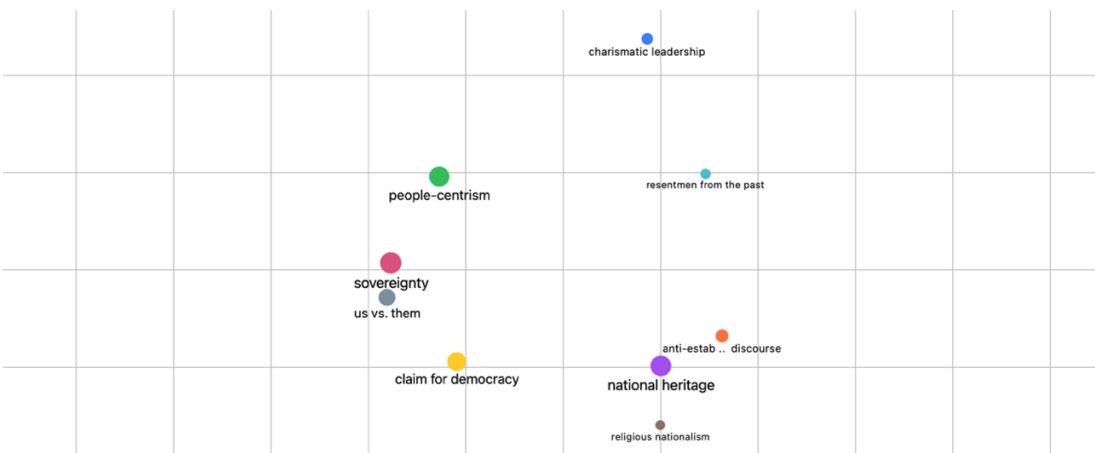


Figure 8: The alignment of the themes

Although they are all interrelated, the structure of the alignment has allowed thematic clustering through the semantic characteristics of the codes. Accordingly, four thematic clusters will be discussed in the following sections: (1) Populist Historical/Nationalist Grounding, (2) Populist Representation, (3) Populist Myth-Making, and (4) Populist Leader.

5.1.2.1. Introduction to the Themes and Comparison of the Two Sources

The data depicted from both sources show the prevalence of different themes. The figure (See Fig. 9, p. 71) exported from the MAXQDA shows that some discursive selectivities of the politicians altered in terms of the specific context in which the production of political talk has taken place.

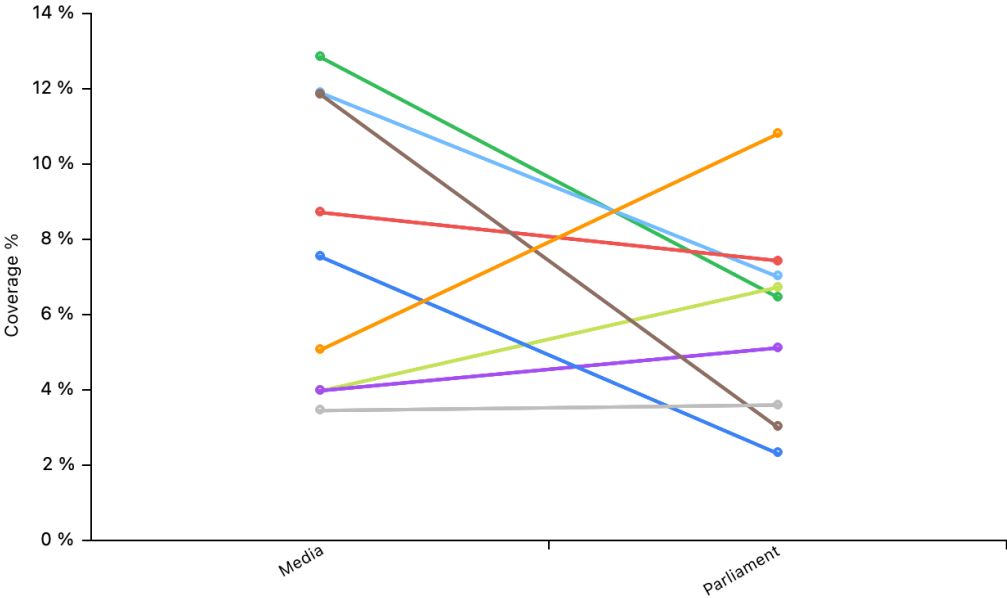
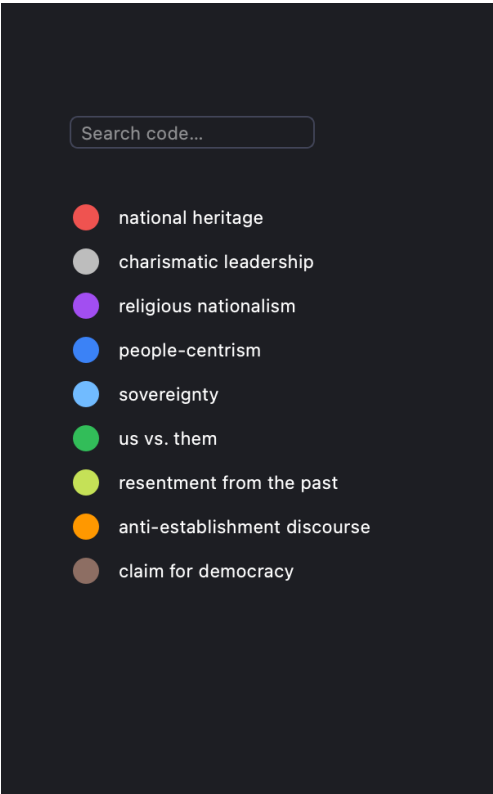


Figure 9: Frequencies of the themes according to the sources

The “media” refers the speeches from the media sources TRT, Yeni Şafak, and Türkiye. The “parliament,” in turn, reflects the speeches from the parliamentary proceedings. The frequencies of the themes are shown according to the colors they were assigned. According to the figure, apart from national heritage, charismatic leadership, and religious nationalism, significant changes in frequencies have been noted in the other themes. This indicates that the three themes mentioned were consistently prominent in discussions related to Hagia Sophia.

The national heritage, in relation to the Hagia Sophia, encompasses those historical sites, monuments, and cultural traditions, reflecting a crucial dynamic in shaping the nation's identity. These elements are tangible reminders of a shared past, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. However, the interpretation and use of national heritage in the case of Hagia Sophia have been manipulated by the populist politicians, to employ historical narratives to mobilize support and reinforce their own political agendas. For many Turkish nationalists, the reconversion symbolized a return to the Ottoman Empire's glory days and a rejection of the secular policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Religious conservatives, on the other hand, saw the reconversion as a restoration of a sacred Islamic site. So, the decision to convert Hagia Sophia was a strategic move by the JDP government to consolidate its power and appeal to a nationalist and religious constituency (Özveren, 2021). By framing the reconversion as a victory for both nationalism and religious piety, the government could mobilize broad support among different segments of the population. Therefore, the national heritage, as a grounding theme for the reconversion, has been mostly utilized in both parliamentary and media speeches.

Similar to the national heritage, charismatic leadership was also a common element regarding its frequency both in parliamentary and media speeches. Charismatic leadership, characterized by a leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers, often plays a pivotal role in populist movements. Populist leaders often employ charismatic rhetoric to appeal to the masses, framing themselves as champions of the people against a corrupt other. In the case of Hagia Sophia, the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, played a central role in driving the reconversion.

President Erdoğan's charismatic leadership style, coupled with his populist rhetoric, allowed him to mobilize public support for the decision. By framing the reconversion as a restoration of a national symbol and a victory for the Islamic faith, Erdoğan was able to tap into the nationalist and religious sentiments of many Turks and Muslims. Thus, as one of the main elements of the reconversion, political discourse on charismatic leadership seemed to be context independent.

Religious nationalism was also found to show similar trends in both sources. Accordingly, by framing the reconversion as a restoration of a national symbol and a victory for the Islamic faith, the JDP government was able to mobilize public support for the decision and to delegitimize any opposition. By appealing to the religious sentiments of the population, populist leaders can create a sense of shared identity and belonging. In the case of Hagia Sophia, the reconversion was presented as a religious and national victory, reinforcing the idea of a Turkish nation united by its Islamic heritage. Therefore, as is the case for the national heritage, religious nationalism reflects the populist shaping of the nation's identity through the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia. Such identity formation reinforcing the reconversion was utilized both in media and parliamentary speeches to the same extent.

The people-centrism, one of the themes showing drastic changes, was utilized mostly in the media speeches. People-centrism, a political strategy that prioritizes the interests and concerns of the people over those of the "other", is often a key feature of populist movements. In the case of Hagia Sophia, the reconversion was framed as a response to the demands of the people, who were seen as longing for a return to their religious and cultural heritage. The instrumentalization of people-centrism in the media allows for direct communication with a wide range of people, bypassing the traditional channels of political discourse. This makes it easier for populist leaders to reach their target audience and spread their message.

Media can be used to evoke strong emotional responses, which is essential for mobilizing popular support. Populist leaders often use emotional language and imagery to engage with their audience and create a sense of shared grievance. In contrast, parliament can be

a highly regulated environment with strict rules and procedures. Media, on the other hand, offers greater flexibility and allows for more informal and spontaneous communication. This can be advantageous for populist leaders who seek to bypass traditional political channels and appeal directly to the people. Plus, media can amplify the voices of individuals and groups, allowing politicians to reach a wider audience. These factors of the use of media for disseminating populist messaging were applied for the utilization of the other themes, sovereignty, us vs. them, and claim for democracy. Accordingly, sovereignty, the supreme authority of a state within its own territory, is a central concept in international relations. Populist movements often emphasize national sovereignty as a way to mobilize popular support and to resist foreign interference. In the case of Hagia Sophia, the reconversion was presented as a matter of internal affairs in Türkiye beyond the purview of international institutions or foreign powers. Such a presentation was offered mostly in media to establish direct appeal and create public pressure regarding helping governments respond to the will of the people.

The "us vs. them" narrative is a common feature of populist movements, which often seek to divide society into two opposing groups. In the case of Hagia Sophia, one segment of the society was portrayed as the "us," who were united by their shared religious and national identity, while the secular others were portrayed as the "them," a corrupt and self-serving group. This narrative helped create a sense of solidarity among the people in Türkiye and construct a targeted other. The media easily utilized such narrative because of the factors, direct engagement with the public, emotional appeal, and bypassing institutional constraints. Similarly, the claim for democracy representing the will of the people and defending it against the interests of the other also manifested as popular sovereignty in the media by reaching the target audience and creating a sense of shared grievance.

The other two themes, resentment from the past and the anti-establishment discourse were found to be more utilized in the parliamentary speeches rather than in the media. Anti-establishment sentiment, a rejection of traditional political institutions and elites, is a common feature of populist movements. By portraying the establishment as corrupt and

out of touch with the interests of the people, populist leaders can create a sense of grievance and mobilize popular support. In the case of Hagia Sophia, the reconversion was presented as a challenge to the secular Kemalist establishment, which had allegedly neglected the building's religious significance. Such sentiment was utilized in the parliamentary speeches because parliament is a field in which political representation takes place as the site of discussion. Therefore, the parliament's confrontational structure provided a platform for political debate and deliberation, allowing for a wide range of viewpoints to be expressed about the reconversion. The anti-establishment discourse intensified such an environment because the opposing sides of the reconversion have been constructed as the JDP government and the Kemalist regime. Concerning this narrative, the resentment from the past, often rooted in historical injustices or perceived slights, was utilized mostly in the parliamentary speeches. The resentments and grievances were exploited and manipulated to delegitimize the Republican establishment within the one-to-one debates in the parliament.

Overall, in line with the critical discourse analysis, different frequencies of the specific themes within the two sources show that the text and the discourse practice have emerged relationally in the case of reconversion. In other words, the conditions of producing political text influenced the contents, subjects, and relations in the discourse. The dominant social practices and relations of power surrounding both the media and parliamentary practices shaped the political narrative, in which different themes are emphasized at different levels. The appearance of the text also was influenced by the way it was produced regarding its interpretation. Parliament and media, as different realms of the production of the political text, offered distinct appeals and political engagements with the public as their qualities of being direct or confrontational.

5.1.2.2. Populist Historical/Nationalist Grounding

The historical and national grounding of the reconversion was in relation to the JDP's utilization of populist politics regarding the revitalization of the Ottoman past. According to the textual analysis, the themes "national heritage," "resentment from the past," "anti-establishment discourse," and "religious nationalism" were found to be closely aligned

with each other (See Fig. 10, p. 77). The relationship between them stems from the instrumentalization of national heritage regarding its relevance with the other themes. The criticisms of the then-established order, which in this case was the Kemalist regime, and the grievances of the people related to the Kemalist regime were reflected through a process of historical grounding that favors the Ottoman past. Religious nationalism was included in such a process in order to emphasize the values of Islam as the nation’s core values and create a “sense of cultural homogeneity” (Kaya, 2021). So, the political agenda for the reconversion was reinforced through the instrumentalization of the national heritage in creating a sense of collective victimhood and fostering resentment towards the pre-established regime’s secular policies.



Figure 10: Populist historical/nationalist grounding

According to the analysis, national heritage was widely utilized in speeches to justify the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque by emphasizing its characteristic as a heritage of the Ottoman Empire. So, this theme emphasizes the need to respect the fact that Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque after the conquest of Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire and to protect the relic of Sultan Mehmet, the Conqueror of Istanbul. The expressions around this theme often aim to arouse a sense of gratitude and respect for the Ottoman ancestors in public. Moreover, the emphasis on national heritage has elevated

the reconversion of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque to the level of a moral and historical obligation:

We are the people who know what heritage we came here within this country; in this geography, we do not reject any of them. How Hagia Sophia was built, its identity in the past, and the way it has evolved from that day to today, we welcome all of them with respect and reverence. This is our cultural value, our historical heritage. (Zengin, 10/07/2020)

The use of vocabulary has been utilized to express the value and meaning of the reconversion as “cultural value” and “historical heritage.” Accordingly, the common knowledge and beliefs around the theme of national heritage are articulated in the abovementioned talk as “respect” and “reverence.” Those who acknowledge the appreciation of this meaning and the heritage are pronounced we, the people, as the subjects of the text. The subject has also further been reflected as the Turkish nation:

The Hagia Sophia Mosque is a sacred relic of the Turkish nation, a holy shrine dating back to the conquest of Istanbul. The debates that flared up following the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, which is the symbol of our conquest but also the dignity and honor of faith of 567 years of history. (Bahçeli, 10/07/2020)

Laclau's discursive approach to populism emphasizes the role of discourse in constructing the "people" as a unified entity (2012). In the case of the Hagia Sophia's reconversion, the "people" were conceptualized as the Turkish nation, united by shared history, culture, and religion. The reconversion was framed as a restoration of a lost part of Turkish history and presented as a symbol of the nation's Islamic heritage:

Hagia Sophia is a tradition starting from Fatih, the symbol of conquest, the meaning, the soul, the love and worship that we long for. Hagia Sophia is breaking the chains of longing. We are reuniting with our Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia Mosque must open for worship. (Yerlikaya, 10/07/2020)

The re-unity of the Turkish nation reflects that the Hagia Sophia was presented as a cultural icon that represented the nation's values and traditions. In line with the discursive approach, the reconversion was framed as a matter of cultural and religious identity, a sacred site that embodied the nation's Islamic faith and culture. The evolution of Hagia Sophia from the past shows the relational value due to the clash between the intended

identity through reconversion and the previous identity. This antagonism is even more clearly articulated in some speeches:

It is obvious that if Hagia Sophia had not been opened as a mosque, our struggle against imperialism at the beginning of this century would be incomplete. Therefore, the step that will complement the liberation struggle is the restoration of Hagia Sophia, which has been open as a mosque for five hundred years and has found its identity with the call to prayer rising from its minarets to the sky, to its original identity. It is the most fundamental, minimum, historical, national, and moral obligation of each of us here. (Atalay, 09/06/2020)

The “struggle” and “liberation” refer to both values loaded in the reconversion and the process of the conflictual identity formation of the Hagia Sophia throughout its history. The abovementioned phrase clearly shows that the reconversion is restoring Hagia Sophia to its legitimate identity, which is the obligation of each member of the parliament and, more broadly, the people of Türkiye. However, who were these people constructed through binary opposition in relation to the other themes of “religious nationalism”, “anti-establishment discourse,” and “resentment from the past”, regarding a viewpoint on reconversion rooted in anti-Kemalist, neo-Ottomanist, and Islamist politics of JDP:

We make our own decisions on issues related to our nation's existence, unity, freedom, and rights, especially the Hagia Sophia issue. We turned Hagia Sophia into a museum, albeit with a wrong decision, and we are turning it back into a mosque. (Erdoğan, 14/07/2020)

According to Laclau (2012), populism emerges when a particular discourse constructs a unified "people" against a perceived "Other." This construction involves the creation of boundaries and the exclusion of certain groups or ideas. In the case of the Hagia Sophia reconversion, the discursive construction of the people has been framed as a matter of national identity and religious heritage. The unified "Turkish people" were considered the rightful heir of the Hagia Sophia. In contrast, the secularists have been displayed as the “the other,” within the politics of anti-establishment. So, the construction of the people encompasses the meaningful practices, in this case, especially the historical and national ones, that shape the identities of individuals and groups by creating conflicts and re-establishing political boundaries. However, the aim of emphasizing conflicts and contradictions in the case of reconversion has not been to resolve the issues; rather, to

foster and solidify the political power of JDP. Therefore, the discourse surrounding the Hagia Sophia ultimately served the political interests of the JDP. The reconversion was a powerful symbol of the party's nationalist agenda and its ability to mobilize public opinion. Accordingly, the “unity,” “freedom,” and “rights,” as the values and meanings of the reconversion, are favored as ideals of the nation’s existence in contrast to the previous “wrong” decision of the Kemalist regime. Therefore, the anti-establishment politics, which is the core of populism while defining the us vs. them dichotomy, crystallized in the case of Hagia Sophia:

The Hagia Sophia Mosque, which has been a mosque since the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453 and served as a mosque for nearly five hundred years, was unfortunately unjustly converted into a museum in 1934, and this wrongful practice of eighty-six years. (Güneş, 11/07/2020)

The phrase “unjust” and “wrongful” practice suggests that the 1934 decision was portrayed as both anti-democratic and anti-freedom. The Kemalist regime was targeted as the subject of such a decision, which caused suffering among people and betrayed Fatih Sultan Mehmet's trust and heritage of the Ottoman Empire. Such claims stemmed from the conditions of the emergence of JDP populism in Türkiye regarding those times of unsettlement and both economic and social crises. The plurality of demands of the time, as Laclau (2004) stated, has led to JDP’s populist rise, which changed the Kemalist regime’s secularist discourse and redefined the political frontiers. Thus, the issue of reconversion has been portrayed as the site of struggle in which the Kemalist regime and the JDP government, as the conflictual political frontiers, confront each other:

The Hagia Sophia Mosque was opened for worship after eighty-six years, and the Muslim Turkish nation rejoiced. In 1934, the decision of the Council of Ministers, which was taken in violation of the foundation deed of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan, was rightfully canceled by the decision of the 10th Chamber of the Council of State. (Yıldız, 16/07/2020)

The “violation of the foundation deed” and cancellation of it draw a line between the subjects of both decisions. Therefore, the relationality between the decision of 1934 and the decision of the reconversion provides a legitimate ground for utilizing anti-establishment politics. Thus, the JDP government is portrayed as respecting the

abovementioned values of unity, freedom, liberation, and national heritage, while the Kemalist regime is openly or subtly demonized:

Last Friday was a historic day. The decision taken in 1934 was changed, and the Hagia Sophia Mosque was freed from its shackles and became a beacon of hope for all believers again. I would like to thank all our beloved nation, especially our President. (Ergun, 16/07/2020)

Such demonization is further grounded by the resentment from the past, which represents the barrier to worship during the period when the Hagia Sophia was a museum, but on a larger scale, it is based on the supposedly repressive and prohibitive policies of the republican reforms on Muslims in Türkiye. Therefore, the legitimacy of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque is tied to a discourse of getting even, of righting a wrong, in response to unjust, unequal, and anti-democratic actions from the past:

Hagia Sophia is the eighty-six-year longing of the beloved Turkish nation. Hagia Sophia will be opened. Those who doubt whether Turks will remain in this homeland may doubt whether Hagia Sophia will be opened. Hagia Sophia will be opened, and it will be opened in such a way that all the meanings that have been lost will be released through its doors, like innocents weeping in chains, in blood, tearing their clothes. An unstoppable flood will now open Hagia Sophia. Wait, young people, let it rain a little more; there is a flood behind every rain. Let us all say: "What more would I want if I could be a straw in that flood." Wait, young people, Hagia Sophia will open like a cherished book. (Esgin, 10/07/2020)

Expressions such as “innocents in chains” and the “eighty-six-year longing of the beloved Turkish nation” refer to a historical struggle and carry a more comprehensive claim of liberation. The suffering and grievances of people are clearly utilized through a rhetoric of victimhood. Releasing of the meanings refers to the lost or forgotten values with the 1934 decision and, in a broader context, with the Kemalist regime. So, the political discourse against the one-party government in the first period of the republic is accompanied by resentment from the past and national heritage and, built in the relationality between the Kemalist regime and the JDP government:

The Hagia Sophia Mosque, which our ancestor Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan bequeathed to us five hundred and sixty-seven years ago, has regained the freedom it deserves, the eighty-six-year captivity has ended, and the longing has ended. With this historic decision, not only a right was restored, but also our independence was once again registered by giving us a second conquest. (Gültekin, 11/07/2020)

“Regaining the freedom” and “restoration of the right,” indicating the ending of “captivity,” further refers to the state of imprisonment created by the Kemalist regime. Those who have been struggling for Hagia Sophia to become a mosque were constructed as Muslim-Turkish people who respect the relic of Mehmet the Conqueror. Therefore, religious nationalism, which favors the identity of Muslim-Turkish, was found to be also aligned with the themes of anti-establishment politics, resentment from the past, and national heritage. Political discourse on religious nationalism in relation to narratives based on origin and belonging rendered the reconversion of Hagia Sophia necessary and legitimized:

In the Turkish Islamic tradition, it is customary to convert the largest place of worship of conquered lands into a mosque, which is called the "right of the sword". This tradition is not specific to Hagia Sophia; it is an ancient tradition practiced in all conquered lands. (Özgürsoy Çelik, 18/06/2020)

The phrase “Turkish-Islamic tradition” reflects the common origin and identity of both being Turkish and Muslim. According to this commonality, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque is the historical right of the Muslim Turk. So, the discursive process of historical and national grounding includes not only the issues of loyalty and responsibility but also rights and justice:

The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is a requirement of our loyalty to all of our ancestors, from Alparslan to Fatih and Abdülhamit. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is not only to honor Fatih's spirit of conquest but also to revive the spirituality of Akşemsettin and the aesthetics and taste of Mimar Sinan in our hearts. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the symbol of the rise of our sun of civilization, the foundation of which is justice, conscience, morality, unity, and brotherhood, which humanity longs for. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

The “unity” and the “brotherhood” further refer to the cultural homogeneity, which all people of Türkiye, and even the Islamic world, must stand for. The reconversion, therefore, was presented as a unifying action which would bring together the people of Islam:

Hagia Sophia's dome, engraved with the 35th verse of Surah Nur, is wearing the light of Islam, and its balconies are wearing the honor of conquest again. Its doors open with the winds coming from Mecca, Medina, and Masjid al-Aqsa, bringing

the Islamic world together in qiyam. Hagia Sophia from eternity, you are ours, and we are yours... (Oktay, 22/07/2020)

Such cultural homogeneity also brings the discourse of common victimization in order to foster resentment of the people against the Kemalist regime. So, almost every speech in which the right of reconversion is related to religious nationalism and national heritage also includes themes of anti-establishment and resentment from the past. Accordingly, the significance of Hagia Sophia as a place of contention has expanded from being a conflict between the Kemalist regime and the JDP government to a struggle between the Kemalist regime and the Turkish-Muslim people as concerned citizens of Türkiye. The grievances of those who suffered during this struggle have been portrayed as rooted in the past. So, not recognizing the decree that transformed Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1934 and continuing to adopt Hagia Sophia as a mosque represents the relationship between the resentment and the anti-establishment discourse:

...We witnessed the liberation of the Hagia Sophia Mosque, the legacy of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan, the symbol of conquest. Thank God, we are witnessing the re-establishment of the bond that was tried to be severed with the values that make us who we are. Hagia Sophia is the meeting with the true meaning of being in this world by getting rid of the burdens of heedlessness. (Subaşı, 11/07/2020)

The subject of "we" and the "values that make us who we are" are both discussed in connection with embracing the Ottoman legacy while rejecting the policies of the Kemalist regime. So, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia represents the "re-establishment of the bond that was tried to be severed" by the Kemalist regime. As abovementioned quote also indicated, the belief related to reconversion has been articulated that it is the second conquest of Istanbul against the Kemalist regime. However, the counterarguments of the opposition parties, such as Republican People's Party, Peoples's Democratic Party, and Good Party, mostly claimed that the Kemalist regime and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, himself were part of the "liberation" of the Hagia Sophia in contrast to political discourse based on the anti-establishment politics:

Five hundred and sixty-seven years ago, Istanbul was conquered by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror. Ninety-seven years ago, it was liberated from the occupation of imperialists by Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Since that day, the flag has not fallen from the skies of our country nor from the skies of Istanbul, and the

call to prayer has not ceased from its minarets. On this occasion, I once again commemorate our two ancestors, Fatih Sultan Mehmet, and Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with mercy and gratitude. We see that the palace brings up the Hagia Sophia issue again, as it does every time it gets stuck. (Öztrak, 09/06/2020)

Accordingly, it has been argued that the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia was an instrumental move to change the political agenda, rather than a decision to realize the will of the nation against the Kemalist regime. In order to cover up the political and social problems that cannot be coped with, the JDP government has created an agenda of reconversion that will arouse the public and awaken historical national values:

While there are many problems in our country, while these difficult days we are going through are obvious, while there are many issues awaiting urgent regulation, bringing regulations that are not in a hurry to the Parliament, just like the Hagia Sophia issue, is nothing more than a tactic to hide the fact that the government cannot govern the country and to distract the nation and the Parliament of the nation with other issues. (Ataş, 11/06/2020)

However, such claims of the domestic opposition further deepened the distinction between the Kemalist regime and the JDP government, and inevitably, us vs. them, because they have been portrayed as internal foci of the destructive forces for sovereign Türkiye as will be discussed in the following section.

Overall, populist grounding for the reconversion represents the historical and national values utilized for creating antagonisms between the Kemalist regime and the JDP government in the discourse on the reconversion of Hagia Sophia. So, the experiential, relational, and expressive values of the political text and talk are all connected to the constructed conflict between these entities. The Kemalist regime has been portrayed as victimizing the people of Türkiye and Islam, while in contrast, the JDP government was depicted as liberating and safeguarding their common heritage. Such conceptualization has had its roots in Panizza's (2005) four conditions of the rise of populism, with a specific focus on Türkiye. The economic and social crises, issue of representation and misrepresentation in the political arena, distrust in the established political system, and President Erdoğan's portrayal of himself as a people's man in contrast to the elites of the Kemalist Republic have all been crystallized in the instrumentalization of historical and national grounding for the reconversion. Accordingly, populism is most extreme in places

where people have specific complaints, desires, and needs, but they don't know exactly what is missing. Their demands haven't been recognized as political demands by their own choice, but instead, the populist leader or their messages have made them important (Panizza, 2005). This idea suggests that populism is driven by the leaders rather than by the people themselves. Therefore, as in the case of Türkiye, populism seems to be as elitist and reliant on a leader, contrary to being a grass-roots movement. However, the discourse on the historical and nationalist grounding for the Hagia Sophia has its basis in the 2000s period of JDP's rise to power and reflects the complaints, desires, and needs of the people at that time rather than being merely a construction.

5.1.2.3. Populist Representation

Populist representation of the people, as the specific style of a political appeal (Ostiguy, 2021), was conceptualized with the close alignment of the themes “sovereignty,” “us vs. them,” “claim for democracy,” and “people-centrism” (See Fig. 11, same page below) Accordingly, the questions of who holds sovereignty and over what is exercised are closely connected to the division of us vs. them in the case of reconversion. The political discourse on such a distinction is inevitably connected to people-centric politics, claiming to make policies to protect the interest of the sovereign people and respect their will against the destructive forces constructed as “them.” Such politics also refers to ensuring democracy for the sovereign people and paves the way for populist representation, as who the people are is shaped around the discourse of “us.”

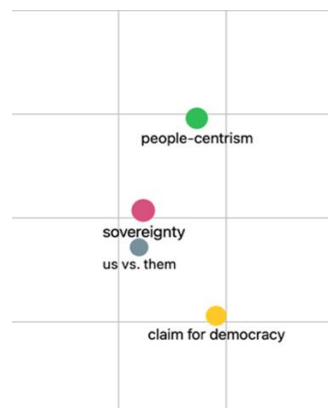


Figure 11: Populist representation

Accordingly, “us” was mostly expressed as the Turkish-Muslim nation and occasionally as the Islamic civilizations in the construction of the sovereign people. Against “us,” it was observed that the discourse on “them” generally referred to Christian European countries and the USA. Although some speeches criticized the reconversion was seen as undesirable by certain domestic agents, especially by some members of the RPP, GP, and PDP opposition, the dichotomy is mostly seen in the emphasis on Türkiye's sovereign rights in its internal affairs and the confrontation with foreign states:

The opening of the Hagia Sophia mosque is a purely internal matter of our country and has nothing to do with international law, and I invite those who create polemics over a decision whose legal validity is even controversial to remember our common values, the conquest and the owner of the conquest. (Özgürsoy Çelik, 18/06/2020)

As an “internal matter,” the reconversion has been constructed as a conflictual arena where Türkiye's sovereignty is at stake. Through this struggle and the “common values” of the shared heritage, the subject, “the owner of the conquest,” was emphasized. Hence, the reconversion was legitimized both legally and culturally, and those who opposed it were discredited for defending a decision that should have been invalid from the outset. As a symbol of both sovereignty and legality, Hagia Sophia’s reconversion was demonstrated as a national cause, especially in the international arena:

The reason is that with this decision, the Turkish state has announced to the world that it will fulfill the requirements of its independence and sovereignty rights and that the concessions made in the past will be removed. (Vahapoğlu, 11/07/2020)

“Independence” necessarily leads to a dichotomy of those who are independent against those on whom they are not dependent. Therefore, such a distinction has been utilized in order to construct and reinforce populist discourse on us vs. them in the case of reconversion. The distinction between us vs. them has become more concrete as the values “sovereignty” and “independence” were further indicated. Thus, a second conquest was declared, not only against the Kemalist regime but against “the whole world”:

...Our independence was once again registered by giving us a second conquest to the whole world that said, “You cannot make Hagia Sophia a mosque.” (Gültekin, 11/07/2020)

As well as encouraging expressions, appeals to emotions to evoke fear, insecurity, and a sense of victimhood have also been utilized to rally public support:

The fossilized ambitions that consider the opening of Hagia Sophia to worship as a complex, that ask the sarcastic question of whether Istanbul will be ours, that try to put a mortgage on the national will by talking about global blackmail will be disappointed. (Bahçeli, 14/06/2020)

With the emotional appeal, the issue of Hagia Sophia also was presented as a clear-cut choice between national sovereignty and foreign interference as a practice of populist simplification to create binary oppositions between “we” and “you”:

We openly warn those who say words and behave against our country in a way that is incompatible with politics, diplomacy, common sense, and reason. If you are willing to pay the price we have paid, then come out. If you have no such intention, open the negotiation channels as soon as possible. We have no eyes on anyone's rights, laws, lands, seas, or natural resources. However, we will not allow anyone to lay a hand on our rights, laws, and interests. (Erdoğan, 25/07/2020)

Overall, the discourse on the distinction between us vs. them was constructed both internationally and domestically. The oppositional arguments of the internal actors, such as MPs from the RPP, GP, and PDP, were portrayed as the “cracked voices” against the rightful decision of sovereign Türkiye:

In the process of opening Hagia Sophia to worship as a mosque, the cracked voices from within and abroad have no value to us. This decision is an indication of Türkiye's sovereignty, and everyone should respect this decision. (Kaya, 21/07/2020)

The constructed other, when it was an internal actor, was externalized by condemned as alienated from its own culture and people. It reflects the characteristic of the right-wing populism, claiming “the other” is also exclusively native, the right-wing populist discourse mostly accuses them of being agents of alien power (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015):

How can a person be so alien to his own geography and values? We strongly condemn this mentality. RPP should immediately do what is necessary. It does not surprise anyone that all kinds of toxic politics emerge from the same

understanding, but it has reached a point where it is no longer tolerable for them to produce justifications for other states that compete with our country. We say it openly and clearly. From Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria, those who think like this are only voicing the theses of other states. This is not criticizing the government. It is not opposition. They systematically defend the thesis of other states. This is toxic politics. They speak not to oppose, but to poison politics. Türkiye has been reinforcing its respect for the places of worship of all religions with new steps for years. These people are doing all kinds of disrespect in the parliament of this country. We strongly condemn this politics. We will continue to fight against them. (Çelik, 11/06/2020)

Thus, every opposition to the reconversion was portrayed as a unified group of enemies, whether they were from inside or outside. Therefore, “us” was constructed both as integrative and divisive (Canovan, 1981), uniting the people who are angry at a defined enemy, both internal and external actors conspiring against their sovereignty. In this way, dissenting voices within the country were illustrated as collaborators of foreign forces:

... internal and external foci, which were instantly disturbed by the Surah of Conquest recited at the Hagia Sophia Mosque on May 29, 2020, once again took up positions and launched a campaign of discord. The moves of the secret Byzantine lobby and Western-admiring local collaborators to wear down our sacred will, question, and discredit our sanctuaries with foreign pressure and suggestions have intensified in recent days. The impositions of Greece on the Hagia Sophia Mosque and the International Religious Freedom Report published by the US State Department are both an insult to our faith and a shameful attack on our national sovereignty rights. Within the sovereign borders of the Republic of Türkiye, the supreme authority that will decide what, how, and for what purpose will be used is the great Turkish nation. (Bahçeli, 14/06/2020)

The enemy mainly opposed to Türkiye’s independence and sovereignty was constructed as the “Byzantine lobby” and “Western-admiring local collaborators” both from the inside and outside the country, representing those who are against the will of the Turkish nation, of the “people.”

Other organizations and countries will only be left to do the same. The smear campaign of Greece and the RPP, which makes politics along the lines of this country, is a vulgar and futile endeavor. It is clear that the rotten and moldy RPP mentality, which wants the Hagia Sophia Mosque to be turned into a museum as well as the Blue Mosque, has unbridgeable gaps between our spiritual rights and sensitivities. I believe that the Byzantine remnants will be disappointed. (...) Those who oppose the Hagia Sophia Mosque and want it to remain as a museum did not raise their ugly voices against the arson of the Çelebi Mehmet Bey Mosque

in Dimetoka, which is on UNESCO's cultural heritage list. They did not object to the reconversion of the Andalusian-era Kurtuba Mosque in Spain, Toygun Pasha, and Mustafa Pasha Mosques in Hungary into churches. There is no one who does not know the ruins of the Hamza Bey Mosque, the Three Martyrs Mosque, the Alaca Imaret Mosque in Greece, which are heart-wrenching and cause indignation in the hearts of the faithful. (Bahçeli, 14/06/2020)

This discourse on the people's right to be sovereign, which was claimed to begin with the conquest of Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire, has contributed to populist politics by instrumentalizing national heritage and combining it with national and legal values. So, the people-centric politics, which seemed to favor the interests of the sovereign people, has been further promoted through the discourses on the people's legitimate rights, rooted in the past, in the issue of Hagia Sophia:

Turkish nation's claim on Hagia Sophia is no less than those who first built this monument nearly 1500 years ago. On the contrary, in terms of its contributions and strong ownership, our nation has a greater right to Hagia Sophia. As Türkiye, we expect the same understanding when it comes to protecting our historical and legal rights, just as we do not interfere with the actions regarding places of worship in other countries. Moreover, this is not a right of 50-100 years but a right of 567 years. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

Such a statement overlooks the fact that Hagia Sophia has changed hands multiple times throughout its history, including periods of Byzantine, Ottoman, and secular Turkish control. While the Ottoman Empire has had a long-standing presence in Constantinople, its ownership of Hagia Sophia has not been continuous. Therefore, the political narrative regarding the heritage of Hagia Sophia fails to acknowledge the significant religious and cultural significance of Hagia Sophia for the Greek Orthodox Church. For centuries, it served as a central place of worship for the Byzantine Empire and continues to hold great spiritual importance for Greek Orthodox Christians. Moreover, such a narrative also ignored that the site was designated as a museum for 86 years, reflecting the country's commitment to secularism. The oversimplification, therefore, has presented a biased and selective view of the historical and legal claims of Hagia Sophia. It emphasizes Türkiye's nationalistic perspective:

There was a desire and a decision in the hearts of our nation that Hagia Sophia would eventually be used as a mosque. Our courts also make decisions on behalf of the Turkish nation. The decision of the 10th Chamber of the Council of State

also begins with 'on behalf of the Turkish nation'. Therefore, with this decision, a long-standing longing in the hearts and minds of our nation has come to an end. May it be auspicious for our nation. (Şentop, 10/07/2020)

The reconversion was presented as the “long-standing longing in the hearts and minds” of the nation so that the phrase “on behalf of the nation” refers to the reconversion as a democratic decision both for the people and by the people. Such political discourse has portrayed the people as “sovereign”, as the actors of a grass-root movement based on the modern democratic idea (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). So, the claim for democracy was found to be accompanied by the discourses on the people’s sovereign rights:

The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footstep of the will of Muslims around the world to leave the era of conquest. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the rekindling of the fire of hope not only for Muslims but also for all the oppressed, victimized, and exploited. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia expresses that we have new words to say to the world as the Turkish nation, Muslims, and all humanity. (Erdogan, 10/07/2020)

Including all the “oppressed, victimized, and exploited” in people of importance has moved the reconversion into a broader issue of human rights and democracy. So, beyond its status as a national cause, Hagia Sophia has been placed in an even more critical position regarding what it represents. Plus, the political discourse on the “will of the people” has seemed to include the will of both the Turkish nation and the Muslims. The nuance here is that every internal actor who does not support the decision of reconversion was shown as collaborating with the outside forces in order to make the construction of the unified people remain homogenous, those to whom Hagia Sophia is assigned as a national and religious cause. Thus, the political text and talk have been organized to appeal to these “people” and the general will. Accordingly, the ultimate decision belongs to the people and nobody other than the people, who are the owners of Hagia Sophia and have sovereign rights to exercise:

What concerns us is what our own nation says and wants. The cultural and legal justifications of the states that do not like this decision have no basis. Their approach is political. Our President’s approach is clear: “We see the Council of State’s decision as a positive step in the name of the rule of law to relieve the public conscience. The final decision-maker on the status of Hagia Sophia is the Turkish Nation, not the others. This is our internal matter. It is up to other countries to respect the decision taken". This was the longing of our nation. (Çelik, 12/07/2020)

The needs and desires of the nation have been portrayed as the most important concern of the people-centric politicians in order to utilize populist politics. In fact, the population had already been divided into those with the general will to support the reconversion decision and those collaborating with external forces against the nation's sovereign rights. Therefore, the common good, in relation to the general will, has referred to the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia, which made “the people” exist as singular. The historical and nationalist narrative produced by the political institutions (Foisneau, 2010) has proposed reconversion as a common good for those who were assumed to be a unified segment of society. In other words, the general will of the Muslim-Turkish people and the Muslim-Turkish people themselves have defined each other relationally through the political discourse, which gave the people a national and historical cause. Therefore, “the people” was constructed as the specific segment of the society that has enabled the consolidation of political power. Although much emphasized by politicians, the borders of “the people” are not clear-cut both in terms of excluded and included ones. “The people” is, rather, as Laclau (2004) stated, an *empty signifier*, relationally constructed according to the neo-Ottomanist, Islamist, and conservatism politics of JDP. Therefore, the representation of the people refers to the representation of a discursive entity constructed through the political discourse itself. As mentioned above, in populist representation, the political appeal is attached to the diagnosis and remedies of the given conditions so that the people are the those who are negatively affected by such conditions and open to the remedies.

Such an understanding evokes the authoritarian tendencies within populist politics in relation to the idea of the general will (Espejo, 2017; King, 2021). Despite the claim for democracy, the focus on the singular general will of the public who have supported the decision of the reconversion has led to an anti-democratic environment in which the rights and interests of the minorities were downplayed because they were portrayed as being against the general will of the sovereign people:

So, why don't those who want to open the Hagia Sophia mosque think about opening the Hacı Bektaş Lodge and the closed Alevi lodges? They don't think because there is something that is looked at with hatred. A grain of sand is also a

desert; a drop is a lake for those who understand. Kill the hatred inside you, and then you will become human; this is the point. (Bülbul, 11/06/2020)

So, the reconversion serves as an example of how authoritarian tendencies can manifest within democratic frameworks. The appeal to the "general will" of the people, while seemingly democratic, ultimately marginalized the rights and interests of minority groups. This episode highlights the potential for populist movements to erode democratic norms and create a climate where the interests of the constructed people are prioritized at the expense of individual freedoms and diversity.

The populist representation in the case of reconversion has implied performative populism, tied to the efficacy of appeals through which populist leaders assert that they represent the genuine people against malevolent societal adversaries (Ostiguy, 2017). The exclusionary framing was applied in order to portray a battle between Turkish-Muslim people and those perceived as enemies of the people, including both internal and external actors, secularists, and Greeks. This narrative reinforced the idea that the reconversion was essential for preserving Türkiye's Islamic identity. In relation to the performative approach, the case of reconversion also includes authenticity and directness, in which populist leaders often claim to represent the "true will of the people." The JDP government presented the reconversion as a reflection of the people's desire to reclaim its Islamic heritage. This narrative positioned the government as the authentic voice of the people. Accordingly, such representation involves emotional appeal, and the JDP government harnessed this emotional energy to mobilize support for the decision.

The narrative, as the dimension of the performative approach (Ostiguy, 2017), was constructed through the value of historical victory, and reconversion was presented as restoring a sacred site to its rightful place. Such a narrative helped to solidify the JDP's position as a champion of the people's religious and cultural aspirations. Therefore, the relations between the subjects and the connection of the discourse to what's going on between the subjects (See, Fig. 8, p. 71) are inseparable due to the role of the populist discourse in creating the relationality between the binaries "the people vs. the other" and "the JDP vs. the Republican Regime" as opposing sides. The JDP employed strategies and

rhetoric designed to evoke a sense of national unity and to marginalize dissent. By framing the decision as a reflection of the people's will, the JDP was able to legitimize a controversial move and consolidate its power.

5.1.2.4. Populist Myth-Making

The process of mythmaking described as the crystallization of the Ottoman past in JDP politics (Kaya, 2021) was found to be reflected through the close alignment of themes “claim for democracy,” “national heritage,” “anti-establishment discourse,” and “religious nationalism” (See Fig. 12, same page below). The populist myth-making reflects the combination of the nationalist/historical grounding and the representation of the people, incorporating the democratic ideal with nationalist and Islamist values. Such a process suggests an alternative to the secular perspective of the revered republic. As a result, the JDP's use of populist politics can be seen in its political narrative and public discourse, which involves attracting the population by reviving neo-Ottoman sentiments (Theodorou, 2022).

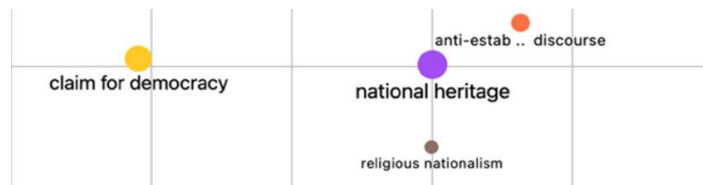


Figure 12: Populist myth-making

Accordingly, while the historical and nationalist grounding implies both neo-Ottomanist and anti-Kemalist politics, the idea that the reconversion was a democratic decision for all people in Türkiye and the Muslims was supported by the Islamist politics of JDP:

The Hagia Sophia Mosque must meet Muslim hearts, and its doors must be opened for worship. It does not matter who says what. What matters is what the nation says, what the ancestors wanted, and what Allah commands. The rest is useless verbiage. (Bahçeli, 14/06/2020)

By appealing directly to the "nation" and constructing a narrative about the "ancestors" and the "will of Allah," a sense of shared identity and a collective purpose have been constructed to mobilize support and marginalize opposing viewpoints. The rejection of elitism and the emphasis on the authority of Allah further reinforce the populist nature of

the narrative. A strong sense of in-group/out-group dynamics has also been fostered by suggesting that the opinions of individuals or groups are irrelevant. The nation's wants were discursively linked to the national heritage and "Allah's commands." So, the decision of reconversion was sanctified through both historical and religious *myth-making*:

As in the first Friday prayer in 1453, we will open our hands to the sky and our hearts to prayer on July 24. To commemorate this historical moment, we will put stamps with the theme 'Opening of Hagia Sophia Mosque for Worship' and a 'first-day' envelope into circulation. (Karaismailoğlu, 22/07/2020)

The religious-based meanings and Islamist values of the Muslim people have been instrumentalized to frame the reconversion as one of the most sacred events in Islamic history. Accordingly, this mythic event was also embodied in national materials such as stamps and envelopes. Such policies were the mobilization of the emotional appeal within the direct engagement with the public:

Today, we are witnessing a historical moment. It was the dream of our youth, and as a result of a struggle that lasted for eighty-six years, the Hagia Sophia Mosque, already known as "mosque" by all of us, was recorded in history today with the annotation bequeathed to us by Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan. May Allah Almighty be pleased with those who were instrumental in this. (Erbaş, 10/07/2020)

By framing the reconversion as a fulfillment of the dreams of the youth and a culmination of a long struggle, the emotional appeal was further grounded through the construction of a shared purpose. The reference to Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan, a historical figure who is revered by many Turks, further reinforces the populist nature of the narrative by appealing to a sense of national pride and identity by connecting the reconversion to a historical legacy. Such an appeal was also utilized through the discourse on the renewed commitment to solidarity among Muslims, thanks to the reconversion:

Today, we were knee to knee with our Muslim brothers and sisters, our foreheads in prostration at the Hagia Sophia-i Kebir Mosque. Yasin in our hearts, Conquest in our minds... We said Nasib, ya Nasib... Alhamdulillah. (Albayrak, 24/07/2020)

Such expressions of unity and solidarity have been concretized through the sense of "we" and "ours." Therefore, the political narrative's construction was grounded in shared senses. In the socio-cultural context, such a political narrative has adopted a localist

attitude (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024), which emphasizes “home pride.” The public engagement style was direct and warm, portraying politicians as one of the people. Thus, as performative populism suggests, intimacy has played a key role in creating and sustaining connections and conflicts in the case of reconversion (Ostiguy, 2017). The form of politics was personalistic rather than formal so that the unique relationship between the public and politicians was established in order to mobilize support for the decision of the reconversion:

The just and legitimate expectation of the Muslim Turkish nation has been met, the doors of Hagia Sophia have been opened wide open, and immaculate foreheads have been enabled to meet with prostration. By establishing a relationship between the date of the construction of Hagia Sophia, the date of its opening for worship, and the date of the Prophet's birth, there is an approach that Hagia Sophia was opened for worship simultaneously with a new religion to be brought by the Prophet of Islam and that it has a metaphysical connection with him. (Şentop, 10/07/2020)

The suggestion of a metaphysical connection between Hagia Sophia and the Prophet Muhammad has reinforced the framing of the reconversion as a divine act. By creating a sense of religious purpose for the reconversion, the appeal to the religious beliefs of the people has been established. A sense of collective identity and shared purpose were constructed by appealing directly to the "Muslim Turkish nation" and constructing a narrative about the "just and legitimate expectation" of the nation. Moreover, the emotional appeal was further instrumentalized through different commonalities other than religion:

... who opened a new era with the call to prayer in Hagia Sophia, whose soul is the first thing that comes to mind when we make a sentence about the army of a nation in uniform, who call each soldier "Mehmetçik" and who consider the military hearth as the "Prophet's hearth", who fought for the homeland, nation, and religion and who fell martyrdom, and I wish healing to our veterans. (Ergun, 16/07/2020)

The emphasis on militarist sentiments in the reconversion has made Hagia Sophia a symbol where almost all common values of the Turkish people intersect. It was presented as sacred as well as legally supported. In this sense, the narrative of the Kemalist regime

that turned Hagia Sophia into a museum has been replaced with a myth presented as a restoration of rights that has a democratic, territorial, and religious basis:

We do not intend to give up our thousand-year presence in our geography and our nearly 600-year sovereignty in Istanbul. We make our own decisions on issues related to our nation's existence, unity, freedom, and rights, especially the Hagia Sophia issue. (Erdoğan, 14/07/2020)

The discourse on the “nation’s existence,” “unity,” “freedom,” and “rights” when linked to the “600-year sovereignty in Istanbul” reflects restorative nostalgia of Türkiye’s imperial past. This nostalgia includes the re-establishment politics. Therefore, the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia as the reconnection of the state with all Muslim people was the crystallization of such politics and reflected the backward-looking attitude in policymaking:

Thus, after 86 years, Hagia Sophia will once again be able to serve as a mosque, as stated in the endowment of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror. I wish this decision to be beneficial for our nation, the ummah, and all humanity. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

Such a process of myth-making represents democratic values of liberation and justice for the nation and all Muslims. So, the nation of Islam and the Ottoman imperial legacy were mainly emphasized both through religious nationalism and the claim for democracy:

They did not object to the reconversion of the Andalusian-era Kurtuba Mosque in Spain and the Toygun Pasha and Mustafa Pasha Mosques in Hungary into churches. No one does not know the ruins of the Hamza Bey Mosque, the Three Martyrs Mosque, and the Alaca Imaret Mosque in Greece, which are heart-wrenching and cause indignation in the hearts of the faithful. (Bahçeli, 14/06/2020)

The “indignation in the hearts of the faithful” was the expression of a struggle against anti-democratic practices against the Muslim people. The narrative of the victimization, supported by the claims of the destruction of several mosques, also was incorporated with further antagonization:

Those who do not dare to directly attack the civilization, history, culture, and values of this nation are trying to find a way for themselves by wearing down our symbols. All of the paths they have sought so far have crashed into the wisdom of our nation and crumbled to the ground. Those who try to confine the Hagia Sophia debate to the brackets of cultural value have not uttered a single word against the

ruthless destruction of the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Likewise, they have not uttered a single word about the destruction or looting of the values that constitute our civilization from Andalusia to Crimea. So, their intention is not to defend cultural heritage. It is to find a cover for the enmity against Turks and Islam that has enveloped their hearts and minds. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

The reconversion of the Hagia Sophia therefore, was portrayed as a victory against such “attacks,” “wearing,” and “crashing”:

That day has come true; the Turkish nation is bright, the Turkish-Islamic world is bright, and the oppressed and victimized geographies are bright. (Gündoğdu, 16/07/2020)

The subject “Turkish-Islamic world” was reduced to one homogenous category of “the people” through the politics of restorative nostalgia. In other words, the relations between the nation of Türkiye and the Muslims were constructed through neo-Ottomanist and anti-Kemalist narratives on the national heritage, including the claims for democracy, justice, and freedom. The religious-nationalist discourses about the reconversion of Hagia Sophia have presented it as a necessity for both nation-statehood in terms of territorial rights and Islam regarding its symbolic value for Muslims. The claim for democracy was reflected in the politicians’ speeches, instrumentalizing not only the victimization of the Muslims but also the inclusiveness towards groups other than Muslims:

We will continue to protect the rights of Muslims, the dominant faith group in our country, as well as those of other religious beliefs. (Erdoğan, 03/07/2020)

In fact, tolerance towards members of different faiths is an approach inherent in our religion. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

We are honored to protect the places where the name of God is mentioned in the places of different religions on our lands. We fulfill this with great sensitivity. (Çelik, 13/07/2020)

The doors of Hagia Sophia will be open to all, local and foreign, Muslim and non-Muslim. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

The discourse on inclusivity has also been the revitalization of the Ottomanist discourse of tolerance in contrast to the oppressive policies of the Kemalist regime. The restorative nostalgia, therefore, was realized through the reconversion symbolizing the myth of the democratic Türkiye rooted in the Ottoman Empire:

History is a witness to our great struggles to make prosperity, security, peace, and tolerance prevail in every place we conquered. Today, in addition to our mosques in every corner of our country, there are thousands of historical shrines belonging to every faith. In addition, churches and synagogues operate wherever there is a congregation. There are currently 435 churches, synagogues and synagogues open for worship in our country. This scene, which is unprecedented in other geographies, is a manifestation of our understanding that sees our differences as richness. Nevertheless, as a nation, even in our recent history, we have not been spared from encountering examples to the contrary. In Eastern Europe and the Balkan geography, where the Ottomans were forced to retreat, very few of the monuments built by our ancestors over the centuries are still standing. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

Türkiye has been portrayed as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic state holding the Caliphate, including multiculturalism and multiethnicity, alongside harmony, order, and tolerance in contrast with this heterogeneity. However, such a portrait oversimplifies the complex historical context of the Ottoman Empire. While there were periods of tolerance and prosperity, there were also instances of oppression, persecution, and cultural erasure. Therefore, the statement avoids discussing controversial aspects of Ottoman history, such as the treatment of non-Muslim minorities, the forced resettlement of populations, and the destruction of cultural heritage sites:

If we have chosen to live in this geography, which has been the apple of the world's eye since ancient times, it means that we are willing to fight for it. We have been waging this struggle uninterrupted since Sultan Alparslan. The conquest of Istanbul was a turning point not only for us but for the whole world. History books point to the conquest of Istanbul as the symbol of Europe's emergence from the darkness of the Middle Ages. The period of Ottoman rule stretching from the Indian Ocean to the middle of Europe is, of course, a cause of great pride for us. The most important feature of this period is that other faith groups and cultures were treated with a tolerance unprecedented in history. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

There has been a populist and nationalistic bias in the process of myth-making, overly favoring Ottoman rule and avoiding the discussion of consequences such as the forced conversion of non-Muslims, the suppression of cultural identities, and the exploitation of resources. Therefore, the statement has offered a simplified and idealized narrative through populist oversimplification. However, such claims for democracy have been countered by opposition groups:

At this very point, when we say "Hagia Sophia mosque will be opened for worship", we have a suggestion: Let the Hagia Sophia mosque be opened for worship; let the mosque hold Cem on Thursdays; let Friday prayers be held on Fridays, and let our Christian friends hold services on Sundays. (Bülül, 11/06/2020)

The myth-making around the Hagia Sophia was also countered by the arguments of opposing parties as being a new area of discourse construction to utilize populist politics:

The Hagia Sophia issue, as a political discourse in this coming period, has obviously become an area of discourse where new designs will be made (...) this Hagia Sophia issue is very... rhetoric. The Justice and Development Party has no resources left for economic populism; in other words, it is not in a position to distribute economic resources. It has been practicing populism on the basis of nationalism for the last five years, and it hit a bump in the 2019 elections; the public did not buy it; in the coming period, you are trying to create a new agenda by practicing populism in a religious sense, and in this context, Hagia Sophia has emerged as a new discourse area. (Özsoy, 16/06/2020)

Accordingly, the religion-based populist discourse has been employed by the JDP as a new political move at a point where the old strategies were not working. So, the instrumentalization of the religious grounding to sanctify the reconversion has been a form of populist politics. The political discourse on the relationship of the subjects seems to have a unifying function, making them "the people" through the narratives of myth-making with respect to the imperial past of Türkiye. The influence of populist politics has depended on these narratives conveyed or embodied and the audience's responses (Panizza, 2005). However, how audiences have responded to this narrative was also based on the populist leader. The form of leadership and decision-making, in relation to the low political appeal (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024), were presented as personalistic, as will be discussed in the following section.

5.1.2.5 Populist Leader

The populist leader, as the main figure of the populist representation and myth-making, was conceptualized according to alignments of the themes "charismatic leadership," "people-centrism," and "resentment from the past" (See Fig. 13, p. 100). In the case of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, the foundations for the construction of "people" have been found to be taken from the Turkist-Islamist tradition. Within this framework, people-

centrism reflects producing policies and political narratives in line with the Muslim-Turkish nation's values, desires, and will, as well as with their grievances and resentments.



Figure 13: Populist leader

Populist leaders appear as someone who granted people-centric politics and ensured direct political appeal to the public for the consolidation of political power. In the case of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the leader, was portrayed as the most influential figure in protecting the historical monuments of Türkiye, and symbols of the Muslim-Turkish civilization:

86 years of longing and yearning for Muslims have come to an end, and with this blessing, the sadness in the hearts of our nation has turned into great joy. May Allah Almighty be pleased with everyone who contributed, especially Mr. President. May He grant them the glad tidings of our Prophet. Hagia Sophia is not just a temple in terms of its meaning; it is a symbol of great faith, civilization, morality, and justice for Muslims. (Erbaş, 10/07/2020)

Such a statement has presented a celebratory narrative surrounding the reconversion of Hagia Sophia, emphasizing the emotional and religious significance of the event for the Turkish nation and Muslim world. However, it has overlooked the concerns of religious minorities, particularly Greek Orthodox Christians, who view Hagia Sophia as a crucial part of their cultural heritage. Thus, oversimplification of the historical and cultural significance of Hagia Sophia has been utilized by reducing it to a purely religious symbol for Muslims. The emotional appeal has been heavily employed through the references to “longing,” “yearning,” and “sadness” and gratitude to President Erdoğan for ending them:

I would like to thank our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been instrumental in ending eighty-six years of longing by converting Hagia Sophia into

a mosque, in realizing the will of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Khan and the desire of our nation. (Taşkın, 11/07/2020)

“Instrumental in ending eighty-six years of longing” suggests a sense of relief and fulfillment, implying that the reconversion has resolved a long-standing grievance. According to the prevailing political discourse of the time, President Erdoğan’s decision to convert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque appeased the people’s resentment from the past, fulfilled the longing of the people, and protected the trust of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, connecting the reconversion to a historical figure, implying that it is a fulfillment of a long-held tradition. Also, the phrase “desire of our nation” suggests a collective longing or aspiration, implying that the reconversion is a reflection of the nation’s shared values and identity:

I feel indescribably honored and honored to walk towards the same blessed goal with our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who made history by opening Hagia Sophia to worship from the stone of the cause, which is the size of the Anatolian continent. (Kavuncu, 11/07/2020)

The use of personal pronouns reflects the personalistic form of politics and fosters the emotional appeal to the people. It creates a sense of inclusivity and solidarity, suggesting that the reconversion was a shared achievement. This can be seen as a strategy to mobilize support and foster a sense of belonging.

By emphasizing the role of charismatic leadership, religious significance, national patience, and historical breakthrough, the political discourse seeks to legitimize the reconversion and garner public support:

Mr. President, with your courage, determination, and leadership, the chains of Hagia Sophia have been broken. Alhamdulillah, with this decision, the seal of our nation has once again been stamped on these lands. (Kurtulmuş, 10/07/2020)

The use of phrases like “chains of Hagia Sophia have been broken” and “seal of our nation has once again been stamped on these lands” presents a simplistic and deterministic view of the event and avoids discussing the controversies surrounding the reconversion, such as the legal challenges and international criticisms. Erdoğan’s role in the reconversion has been greatly promoted, emphasizing his “courage, determination, and leadership”:

Under the leadership of our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan today, the call to prayer and the Hatmi Sharifs rising to the sky from Hagia Sophia, the sermon to be delivered, and the Friday prayers to be performed will be the manifestation of the patience and prayers of our nation, the sign of leadership and courage that has made a breakthrough in history, and the declaration of the determination that will exist until doomsday. (Şentop, 24/07/2020)

The image of Erdoğan as a strong and decisive leader was explicitly credited, in line with the sense of divine intervention and collective perseverance. The emphasis on the religious significance of the event, focusing on the call to prayer, Hatmi Sharifs, sermons, and Friday prayers, has reinforced the spiritual and cultural importance of Hagia Sophia. Framing the reconversion as a “breakthrough in history” suggests a significant and unprecedented event through the process of myth-making. Such a myth also includes the determination and courage of the nation, implying a strong and resilient spirit:

May it be auspicious and blessed for the entire Islamic world. Hagia Sophia, the symbol of conquest, has regained the status and freedom it deserves. May Allah be pleased with you, our President, who put an end to the victimization of believers and the condemnation of history through Hagia Sophia. (Oktay, 10/07/2020)

May the decision of our nation’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which fulfills the aspirations of our nation, be auspicious again. (Çelik, 12/07/2020)

An emotional appeal to the entire Islamic world suggests a sense of shared identity and solidarity, and reconversion was framed as an “auspicious and blessed” event, implying a positive and divine significance. Therefore, the narratives of myth-making on the Hagia Sophia in reference to its symbolic meanings have included a hero, President Erdoğan, who is worthy of “the glad tidings of” the Prophet. So, he was portrayed as an extraordinary man who is also “the architect of strong Türkiye”:

My Lord has granted us the opportunity to walk together with our President, the architect of strong Türkiye, reminding the whole world that we are the heirs of a great civilization and witnessing these historical moments. (Çetin Erenler, 23/07/2020)

The “opportunity” to walk together with such a great man was portrayed as a privilege regarding the identification between the people and the leader. Accordingly, populism can be defined as a naming process determining what is the name of the “people” (Goyvaerts, 2024). Regarding the reconversion, the process of identification, which filled the gap of

“who the people are,” involves resentments and longings of the targeted Turkish-Muslim public:

My President, the leader of the world who broke his chains, you have doubled the prayers you have received for eighteen years. May Allah be pleased with you thousands of times. (Karahocagil, 16/07/2020)

“The leader of the world” and “breaker of the chains” imply the global significance and influence of Erdoğan, as well as his heroic characteristics via suggesting a sense of liberation and overcoming adversity. His religious piety and moral authority were emphasized by claiming an increase in prayers. Accordingly, these phrases were chosen to evoke specific emotions and associations. They were designed to create a sense of triumph, gratitude, and national pride, reinforcing the idea that the reconversion is a significant and positive event. The role of President Erdoğan was further grounded through his influence on the nation’s identity:

Once again, we thank Mr. President for opening Hagia Sophia for worship, completing the missing piece of the spirit of unity that our nation has preserved for thousands of years, and reminding us once again that we are a great nation.” (Gündoğdu, 16/07/2020)

The attribution of the virtue of “completing the missing piece of the spirit of unity” to President Erdoğan also reflects the problem of representation. Accordingly, in the case of populist politics, producing people-centered political discourse promises strong representation and fully reconciled people (Goyvaerts, 2024). The fully reconciled people have been discursively reconciled through their common will, desires, values, and grievances, as well as their shared past. The representation of these people has been utilized by President Erdoğan, who was portrayed as a strong leader recognizing and representing the desires and will of the nation in line with Islamic values and ending years of longing. He was the reminder of “who the people are” and gave them their voice:

On behalf of our beloved nation and our fellow citizens of Niğde, I would like to thank our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who saved Hagia Sophia from the persecution of being a museum and made it “Hagia Sophia Mosque” again, who gave voice to our nation, interpreted the feelings in his heart and made us experience this joy. (Gültekin, 11/07/2020)

As a form of political style, populist leadership refers to a specific type of popular mobilization via the leader's direct relation with the supporters (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). Hence, the political-strategic approach suggests that populist leaders manipulate public opinion and consolidate their power. In the case of reconversion, President Erdoğan has employed strategies designed to position himself as the "savior of the people," appealing to the electorate's fears, grievances, and desires. Through such a framework, Erdoğan positioned himself as the defender of the people's rights and interests against perceived enemies. The reconversion was framed as a victory of Erdoğan for the people against secularists and Western powers. He employed a variety of discursive strategies to reinforce this narrative, including religious nationalism, restorative nostalgia, and anti-Western sentiment. So, political-strategic analysis highlights the strategic nature of Erdoğan's leadership. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia was not simply a matter of religious or cultural sentiment; it was also a political maneuver designed to bolster Erdoğan's power and legitimize his rule.

The political-strategic approach suggests that populist politics depends on supremely powerful personalities and implies the automatic transfer of "the people's" sovereignty to a personalistic leader (Weyland, 2017). Such an understanding refers to a divine charisma and extraordinary persona. However, in the case of the reconversion, attributions to President Erdoğan with their historical grounding have made him the savior of the Hagia Sophia and, more importantly, of the people. So, the charisma of Erdoğan stems from attributions, people's perceptions, and responses to him (Willner, 1984). Such a form of leadership refers to low political appeal, regarding Erdoğan's personalistic political style and direct engagement with the public. The attributions, such as giving a voice to the people and reminding them "who they are," were the very construction of the people as the reconciled segment of society through the political discourse. Accordingly, "the people" have the instrumental value in making the reconversion of Hagia Sophia a myth and making Erdoğan the hero of this myth. Such storytelling reflects the identification process of the people with the leader through those stories transferred (Panizza, 2005). Therefore, as the subjects of the identification process, "the people" and the political

power of President Erdoğan were relationally dependent on each other with respect to populist storytelling, including not only the words but, more broadly, the leader's personal life. A personalistic form of leadership, therefore, was realized through the expressions of Erdoğan, which were composed of both his political speeches and his own biography. Accordingly, because the people have identified themselves with President Erdoğan, they have made sense of their past circumstances and present condition and were offered a path towards a better future through his qualities:

Türkiye's honorable and result-oriented stance in every field today has not come easily. In order to put forward an independent and dignified policy on behalf of your country and nation, you must have the political, economic, military, and diplomatic power to do so. A country struggling with political instability could not do so. That is why we implemented the Presidential Government System with the support of our nation. A country that had hit rock bottom economically could not have done so. In the past 18 years, we have strengthened our infrastructure and put our macro economy on solid foundations. A country completely dependent on foreign countries in terms of military could not have done so. While developing our defense industry on the one hand, we have strengthened our army along national lines on the other. A country with underdeveloped diplomatic capabilities could not have done so. With our widespread and effective diplomatic channels, we have made our foreign policy more influential on every international platform. Our vision of a strong and great Türkiye has gradually begun to take shape and turn into actual results. (Erdoğan, 25/07/2020).

By presenting the strong Türkiye, President Erdoğan also has presented his decisions' power regarding the future of Türkiye. As the savior and defender of the people, Erdoğan's position within the political realm has been valorized through discursive practices. So, the discourse about reconversion has played a vital role in the consolidation of Erdoğan's political power in relation to his charismatic leadership, which makes people believe that he was on a democratic mission of faith, justice, morality, and liberty:

With our historical struggle as a nation, we are building a bridge that embraces all humanity from the past to the future for the bright future of the civilization we represent. Inshallah, we will continue to walk on this blessed path without stopping, without hesitation, without giving up, and with perseverance, sacrifice, and determination until we reach our destination. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

Using phrases like "we" and "our" suggests that Erdoğan identifies himself with the people and presents himself as a champion of their cause to build a cult of personality. Such a

cult of personality has been grounded in Islamist sentiments and emotional appeal, suggesting a deep religious faith through the use of phrases such as “Inshallah” and providing a moral justification for the actions of Erdoğan. Invoking a sense of collective suffering and resilience has fostered a sense of strong solidarity among the audience by emphasizing a shared national identity rooted in historical struggles. So, such a narrative has employed populist rhetoric by appealing to the “common people” against perceived adversaries. This creates a sense of unity and exclusion, fostering a strong sense of in-group/out-group dynamics.

We, too, have had a love for Hagia Sophia in our hearts since our youth. We believe that we have provided an important service to our nation by reopening this temple for worship in accordance with its foundation without prejudice to its identity as a cultural treasure. (Erdoğan, 10/07/2020)

The expression “we, too, have had a love for Hagia Sophia in our hearts since our youth” reflects a personalistic form of leadership and is attributed to Erdoğan’s own biography, suggesting a deep-rooted affection and reverence for the historical site. The identification of the people with Erdoğan has been utilized through such personal narratives, constructing emotional appeal. Erdoğan’s mission to ensure democracy for the people has also been reinforced through the phrase “without prejudice to its identity as a cultural treasure.” Therefore, in contrast with the shared grievances and resentments, the act of reconversion has been presented as liberation, justice, and morality through discursive practices.

Erdoğan's leadership reflects both the political-strategic and performative populist leadership in which political charisma is constructed through the direct relationship between the people by means of low political appeal. The political charisma of Erdoğan, even though it stems not from his own biography in a causal way but from the dialectical relation between his biography and the society’s history, has mobilized the public to support the reconversion. In this sense, the relational dialectical approach to the discourse analysis that this thesis adopts, as in all other thematic clusters, points to the relation of discourse to situational context and its reproduction.

5.2. The Textual Analysis in Relation to the Broader Context

The explanatory analysis, one of the stages mentioned by Fairclough (1995) in the three-dimensional analysis technique, is the stage in which the texts examined are interpreted and addressed within their political and social context (See Fig. 14, p. same page below).

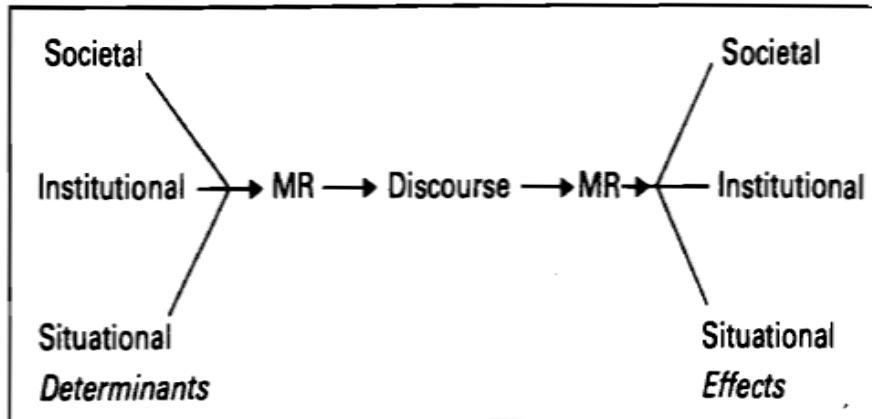


Figure 14: Explanatory analysis

(Adapted from Fairclough, 1989)

MR: Member Resources

The coronavirus pandemic, economic crises, and the issue of unemployment have referred to the societal determinants, coupled with the decrease in the vote rates of the JDP. However, more historically, the broader context of the politics in Türkiye, led the JDP to put the reconversion into the political agenda as a strategic move. The reconversion was an important step in reinforcing the JDP's rhetoric of representing the national will (*milli irade*), which has been at the forefront of its populist policies since it came to power. Hence, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia has influenced the dynamics at societal, institutional, and situational levels, playing a part in the process of re-identification of the public with the JDP and President Erdoğan, the electoral consolidation of the JDP and eventually the reproduction of the political power (See, Fig. 15, p. 107). A critical analysis of the discourse surrounding the reconversion reveals three key dimensions: textual, intertextual, and contextual. At the textual level, the JDP employed a range of rhetorical strategies to create a powerful and emotionally resonant narrative.

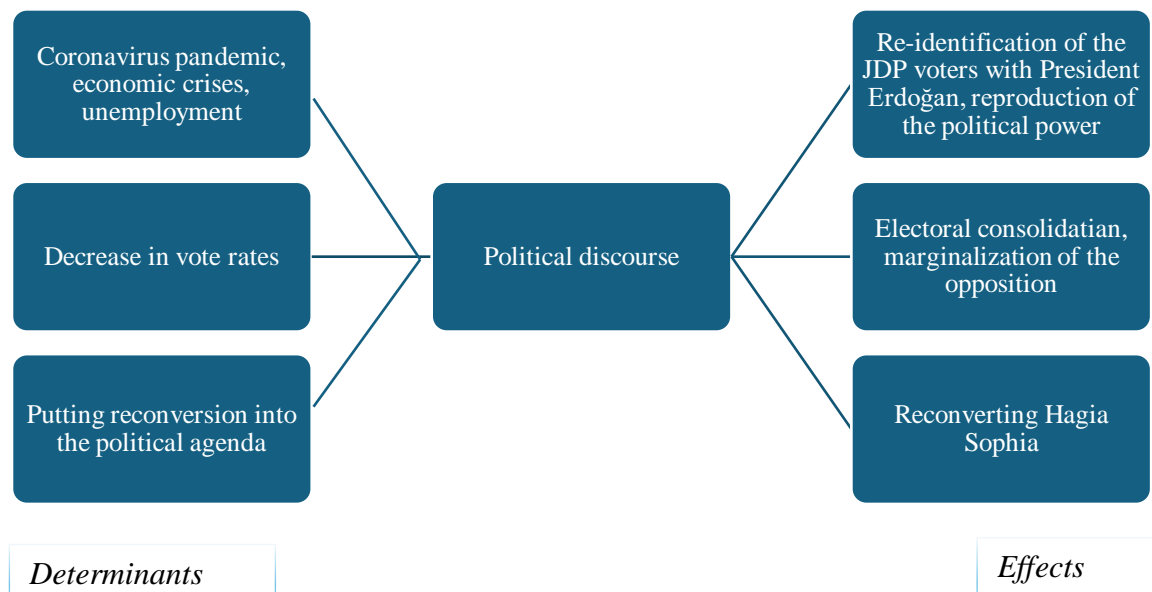


Figure 15: Explanatory analysis in the case of reconversion

Metaphors like "second conquest" and "return to our roots" evoked a sense of historical significance and national pride. Inclusive language, such as "the people" and "the nation," fostered a sense of unity and belonging, appealing to a broad audience and exhortative language, calling on people to "rise up" and "defend our heritage," inspired action and created a sense of urgency. The exclusion of certain groups has also been utilized through political discourse, implying a perceived enemy with the populist distinction of us vs. them. Intertextually, the JDP drew on historical references and religious texts to legitimize the reconversion and appeal to a wider audience. References to the Ottoman Empire and Sultan Mehmet II connected the reconversion to a glorious past, while religious texts reinforced its religious significance. Moreover, the JDP controlled the media landscape, ensuring that its message was disseminated widely and unchallenged.

At the contextual level, the reconversion discourse was used to reinforce existing power relations and to marginalize opposition. The JDP presented itself as the legitimate voice of the people while portraying its opponents as elitist and anti-democratic. Additionally, the reconversion was used to reconstruct and reinforce the national identity rooted in

Islamic heritage and the Ottoman legacy, fostering a sense of shared purpose and belonging. The JDP utilized historical grievances, such as the loss of territory and the suppression of Islamic identity, to create a sense of victimhood and justify the reconversion as a necessary act of redress. However, the support for the reconversion in particular, and the populist politics in Türkiye in general, cannot be evaluated as merely leader driven. The political discourse on reconversion has been relationally constructed through the interaction of the contents and subjects, rooted in Türkiye's history, existing group differences, identities, and resentments. The grounding for the reconversion, therefore, necessitated the reconstruction of the *unified people* as the Turkish-Muslim community who share common values and cultural heritage. The people as a socio-political construct was utilized both to ground the reconversion as an act of the national will and to reconstruct the enemy both the internal and external actors against this will.

The construction of the Turkish-Muslim community versus external foreign forces or their internal collaborators has reflected the discursive approach to populism. However, such construction was beyond the issue of Hagia Sophia; rather, it was historically and socially grounded in the politics of Türkiye. The anti-elitist and anti-establishment policies pursued by the JDP since coming to power have resulted in the constructed enemy targeting all forms of opposition, with the common enemy being the foreign powers and their domestic collaborators who are portrayed as threatening Türkiye's independence. Hence, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia is just an example of the us vs. them dualism in the politics of Türkiye.

The performative dynamics of populism have been utilized to reconnect the JDP and President Erdoğan deeply with the people who share grievances regarding the secular policies of the previous Kemalist regime. The low political appeal, including emotional bonding and personalistic leadership, was effectively used to construct the political discourse in the case of Hagia Sophia. In turn, the discourse reproduced the existing power relations, and the process of identification of the public with the populist leader has been further grounded.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The reconversion of Hagia Sophia in 2020 was a pivotal event in politics in Türkiye, serving as a powerful symbol of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP)'s neo-Ottomanist and Islamist agenda. This study has examined the role of populist politics in shaping the discourse surrounding reconversion and the ways in which the JDP employed populist strategies to mobilize support, legitimize its rule, and reconstruct the national identity. In this regard, it is argued that the reconversion of Hagia Sophia is not merely a spatial or cultural change but an outcome of the ruling party's populist agenda. Therefore, this study analyzes the importance of Hagia Sophia as a political symbol by examining political speeches and news in conservative media outlets close to the government using critical discourse analysis.

The political discourse during the reconversion was a representation of the JDP's populist politics regarding the Hagia Sophia's symbolic meanings. At a time when restrictive practices were introduced in a sense that for the people, despite the people, due to coronavirus pandemic, which was accompanied by the economic crisis and unemployment, the reconversion was a case where the JDP was able to reproduce the discourse of national will, "*milli irade*." In this case, the JDP aimed to reinforce the ongoing binary politics, to reinforce the distinction between us and them, and to re-establish a national identity formation.

Through the critical analysis of the political discourse, it has become evident that populist politics played a central role in the decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia. The JDP skillfully employed populist strategies to frame the issue as a choice between national sovereignty

and foreign interference, appealing to the emotions and grievances of the masses. By constructing a narrative that pitted "the people" against a perceived "elite," the JDP was able to mobilize significant public support for the reconversion. Moreover, the JDP's populist discourse was instrumental in consolidating its power and shaping the national identity. By portraying himself as the defender of Turkish values and interests, President Erdoğan was able to marginalize opposition and reinforce his legitimacy. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia served as a powerful symbol of the national identity, rooted in Islamic heritage and the Ottoman legacy.

The reconversion of Hagia Sophia was a political event that was shaped by a variety of factors, including populism, nationalism, and religious sentiment. The JDP's utilization of populist strategies has made the reconversion to be analyzed in four discursive categories: (1) Populist Historical/Nationalist Grounding, (2) Populist Representation, (3) Populist Myth-Making, and (4) Populist Leader.

A central theme in the discourse surrounding the reconversion was the creation of a sense of historical grievance. The JDP portrayed the Kemalist regime as a hostile force that had sought to suppress Islamic identity and erase Ottoman heritage. Therefore, the reconversion was framed as a "second conquest" of Istanbul, a symbolic victory over the secular legacy of Atatürk. This narrative was used to mobilize support for the JDP and to legitimize its policies. The JDP argued that the Kemalist regime had violated the principles of Islamic law by converting Hagia Sophia into a museum. By reconverting the mosque, the JDP aimed to rectify this historical injustice and restore the Islamic character of Istanbul and, more broadly, Türkiye. Beyond its purely nationalistic dimensions, the reconversion discourse was expanded to encompass broader issues of human rights and democracy. By positioning Hagia Sophia as a symbol of both Turkish nationalism and Islamic heritage, the JDP sought to appeal to a diverse range of constituencies. This involved constructing a vague and inclusive notion of "the people" that encompassed both Turks and Muslims while simultaneously excluding certain groups.

The JDP argued that the reconversion was not merely a religious issue but a matter of national sovereignty and cultural identity. By reclaiming Hagia Sophia, Türkiye was

asserting its right to determine its own destiny and to preserve its Islamic heritage. This message resonated with many Turks who felt marginalized by the secular policies of the Kemalist regime. Just as the reconversion of Hagia Sophia is conceptualized as protecting the Ottoman heritage in the national context, in the international context, the universal importance of Hagia Sophia is not emphasized, and the issue is evaluated as a matter of national sovereignty. Moreover, the JDP linked the reconversion to broader issues of human rights and democracy. The party argued that the reconversion was a victory for religious freedom and the rights of all oppressed peoples. This message was aimed at appealing to international audiences and garnering support for the JDP's foreign policy initiatives.

The political discourse on the reconversion was also instrumental in the JDP's myth-making efforts. By emphasizing the Ottoman imperial legacy and its association with religious nationalism, the JDP sought to create a shared identity for Turks and Muslims. This was achieved using restorative nostalgia and the construction of a narrative that presented the reconversion as a necessary step towards national and religious liberation. The JDP idealized the Ottoman Empire as a golden age of Islamic civilization, a period when Türkiye was a powerful and respected nation. The reconversion was portrayed as a return to this glorious past, a symbol of Türkiye's resurgence as a global power. This narrative was designed to inspire national pride and to mobilize support for the JDP's foreign policy ambitions.

The reconversion discourse played a crucial role in the consolidation of Erdoğan's political power. By portraying himself as the "savior of the people" and the champion of reconversion, Erdoğan was able to enhance his charismatic leadership and strengthen his position within the political landscape. The reconversion served as a powerful spectacle, allowing Erdoğan to mobilize public support and reinforce his image as a strong and decisive leader. The discourse surrounding the reconversion helped to create a cult of personality around Erdoğan and to solidify his control over the JDP and the Turkish state. The reconversion was presented as a personal triumph for Erdoğan, a testament to his leadership and his commitment to the Turkish nation. This narrative helped to consolidate

Erdoğan's power base and to secure his position as the dominant figure in politics in Türkiye.

The reconversion of Hagia Sophia was not merely a religious or cultural event but a complex political spectacle. It was a strategic move by the JDP to consolidate its power, promote its ideology, and shape the national identity. By examining the discourse surrounding the reconversion, this study has shed light on the discursive and performative populist strategies employed by the JDP and the ways in which they have been used to mobilize support and legitimize its rule. Hence, the reconversion was an example of populist politics in Türkiye under the JDP rule, reflecting the relational dynamics between the political leader and the historical conditions of the given society. Consequently, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on populist politics by examining the instrumentality of the political discourse and the symbolic meaning rooted in the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / ÖZET

GİRİŞ

"Dünyaya bir hayalet musallat oldu - popülizm" (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, s. 1). Ionescu ve Gellner'in kitabının 55 yıl önce yayınlanmasının ardından popülizm, farklı branşlardan birçok akademisyenin gündemine yeniden girdi. Bu durum dünya siyasetinde bir döngüsellik gösterirken, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi yönetimindeki Türkiye de popülist politikalarından nasibini alıyor. Tanımı hala muğlak olan popülizmin yaygınlığını sorunsallaştırarak başlayan bu çalışma, sağ popülist politikaların izdüşümlerini AKP hükümetinin son uygulaması olan Ayasofya Müzesi'nin camiye dönüştürülmesinde aramayı amaçlamaktadır. UNESCO Dünya Mirası Listesi'nde yer alan Ayasofya'nın 2020 yılında büyük ölçüde dini ve milliyetçi duygulardan etkilenecek müzeden camiye dönüştürülmesi, iktidardaki Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin (AKP) iktidar tabanını güçlendirmek ve muhafazakâr ve milliyetçi seçmenlere hitap etmek için yaptığı stratejik bir manevra olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Dolayısıyla bu tez, Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüştürülmesinin günümüz Türkiye'sindeki sağ popülizmin açık bir yansıması olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Sağ popülizm genellikle kültürel gerileme, ulusal kimliğe yönelik algılanan bir tehdit ve idealize edilmiş bir geçmişe dönüş özlemi anlatısı üzerinden gelişir. AKP, dini sembolleri ve tarihi anlatıları kullanarak seçmenlerinin önemli bir bölümünü, özellikle de kendilerini marjinalleşmiş ve seküler düzene yabancılaşmış hissedenleri etkili bir şekilde mobilize etmiştir. Dolayısıyla Ayasofya'nın cami olarak yeniden ibadete açılması, ulusal bir sembolü geri kazanmak,

Türk-Müslüman kimliğini daha muhafazakâr ve dini bir yönde yeniden tanımlamak ve AKP'nin siyasi etkisini pekiştirmek için hesaplanmış bir çaba olarak görülebilir. Çalışmanın amacı, Ayasofya'nın yeniden camiye dönüştürülmesini günümüz Türkiye'sindeki sağ popülizm bağlamında eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirmektir. Bu bağlamda, temel araştırma sorusu aşağıdaki gibidir: Ayasofya'nın yeniden camiye dönüştürülmesi AKP'nin kullandığı popülist stratejilerle nasıl ilişkilendirilmiştir? Bu bağlamda çalışma, popülizme yönelik akademik yaklaşımlar ile Türkiye'de süregelen popülist politikalar arasındaki ilişkiyi ve bu ilişkinin Ayasofya örneğindeki izdüşümlerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çerçevede, Ayasofya'nın yeniden inşası popülizm, "halk ve öteki" ayrımı, milli irade, önceki düzen karşıtlığı, karizmatik liderlik ve ulusal miras gibi öne çıkan kavramlarla ilişkilendirilerek analiz edilmiştir.

KURAMSAL ÇERÇEVE

Yaygın olarak kullanılan ancak çoğu zaman yeterince tanımlanamayan popülizm, tartışmalı bir kavramdır ve bu durum olgunun doğru bir şekilde anlaşılması ve tartışılmasında zorluklara yol açmakta ve ayrıca kimin popülist olarak nitelendirileceğini tanımlamakta zorlanmaktadır. Buna rağmen, popülizm son yirmi yılda akademik literatürde önemli bir ilgi kazanmıştır (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). Popülizme artan ilgi, sosyoloji, siyaset bilimi ve medya çalışmaları gibi farklı alanlardan çeşitli bakış açıları ve yaklaşımların ortaya çıkması ile sonuçlanmıştır. Genel olarak popülizm, halkın otoritesini ve "güçlü" ile "güçsüz" arasındaki mücadeleyi vurgulayan bir söylem içinde bir kimlik belirleme biçimi olarak işlev görmektedir (Annovi, 2024). Popülist pratikler, mevcut sosyal ve siyasi kurumların istikrarlı bir toplumsal yapıyı sürdürmedeki yetersizliğinden kaynaklanmaktadır (Baykan, 2023).

Popülizmin sistematik bir şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamak, her bir durum için ortak bir öze sahip olduğu varsayımını gerektirir. Ancak Eric Fassin'in (2017) de belirttiği gibi, her kelimenin ortak bir özü yoktur. Günlük dilde popülist olarak adlandırdığımız siyasi figürler, partiler ve hatta siyasi stratejiler, bazı benzerlikler gösterebilirler de mutlaka ortak bir paydaya sahip değildir. Kuzey ve Latin Amerika, Rusya, Afrika ve Avrupa gibi farklı örneklerde popülist rejimler hem benzerlikler hem de farklılıklar göstermektedir (Hadiz

& Chryssogelos, 2017). Dolayısıyla, popülizmi incelemek ancak ortaya çıktığı sosyal ve siyasi bağlamı göz önünde bulundurulduğunda anlamlı olabilir. Popülizmin sosyal arka plan, genel siyasi eğilim ve operasyonel mod olmak üzere farklılaştığı üç boyut vardır (Rucht, 2018). Sosyal profil, tarım popülizmi veya işçi sınıfı popülizmi gibi popülizm türlerini ifade eder. Popülist grubun siyasi görüşleri de popülizmi sağ ya da sol popülizm olarak ayırır. Üçüncü boyut olan operasyonel mod ile birlikte popülizm, siyasi eğilimlerle ilişkili olarak tabana dayalı, aygıtı dayalı ve karizmaya dayalı olarak nitelendirilebilir; bu da sol popülizmdeki anahtar kategoriyi sınıf olarak, sağ popülizmdeki anahtar kategoriyi ise halk olarak ifade eder (Rucht, 2018). Bununla birlikte, ortak bir zemin olmamasına rağmen, popülizmi anlamak ve incelemek için farklı yaklaşımlar geliştirilmiştir.

Söylemsel yaklaşım, İtalyan Marksist Antonio Gramsci'nin çalışmalarından, Jacques Derrida'nın yapısökümü ve Jacques Lacan'ın psikanalizi gibi post-yapısalcı teorilerden yararlanmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım popülizmi "halk" kavramını şekillendiren bir söylem olarak görmektedir. Ayrıca, söylemsel yaklaşım içerisinde, "halk"ın oluşumu yalnızca popülizmin değil, daha geniş anlamda siyasetin ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak değerlendirilmektedir (Thomassen, 2024). Bunun tersine, popülizmi ideolojik bir olguya indirgeyen düşünsel yaklaşım, milliyetçilik, ekonomik eşitsizlik ve elitizm karşıtlığı gibi belirli fikir ve ideolojilerin, geniş bir sosyo-politik kavram olarak popülizmin analizlerinde gözlemlenebileceğini ileri sürmektedir (Mudde, 2017, s. 48). Politik-stratejik yaklaşıma göre popülizm, liderlerin takipçileriyle doğrudan ilişki kurduğu özel bir halk seferberliği biçimi olarak görülmektedir (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). Lider ve takipçileri arasındaki bu doğrudan ilişki, ilgili resmi bir organizasyonun yokluğundan veya mevcut olanı göz ardı etmeye yönelik kasıtlı bir seçimden kaynaklanmaktadır. Popülizmin merkezi yönü, güç kazanma ve kullanma arayışındır; bu nedenle de popülizm, kişisel bir liderliğin biçimi olarak kabul edilir. Sosyo-kültürel yaklaşım popülizmi anlamının ilişkisel bir yolu olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu bakış açısına göre popülizm, siyasi figürler ile toplumsal taban arasındaki belirli bir siyasi bağlantı biçimi olarak nitelendirilebilir. Bu bağlantı, sosyal, kültürel ve tarihsel faktörler nedeniyle toplumun belirli kesimlerinde yankı bulan "basit çağrılar" aracılığıyla şekillenir ve ifade edilir

(Ostiguy, 2017). Bu nedenle popülizm, ideolojik yönü ikincil öneme sahip olmakla birlikte, öncelikle bir siyaset yapma yöntemi olarak görülmektedir. Bu bakış açısı, popülizmin duygusal hikâye anlatımının altını çizmekte ve popülizmi, yapılan açıklamalar ve lider ile takipçileri arasında kurulan bağ ile şekillenen iki taraflı bir olgu olarak kabul etmektedir. Bu bağ hem sosyo-kültürel hem de politik-kültürel unsurları kapsamaktadır (Ostiguy, 2017).

POPÜLİZM VE AKP

Türkiye'deki popülist hareketler tarihsel olarak bürokrasi, devlete bağlı iş dünyası ve akademiye oluşan "merkez "in yönetici elitleri ile kültürel çeşitliliğe sahip "çevre" arasındaki yarılmadan dolayı ortaya çıkmıştır (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). Bu bölünme, seçmenlerin sol-sağ ideolojik spektrum boyunca kendilerini konumlandırmalarına da yansımakta; seküler değerler merkezle, dindarlık ise çevreyle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Demokrat Parti ve Adalet Partisi gibi sağ partiler, milliyetçi muhafazakârlığı ve İslamcılığı vurgulayarak çevrenin temsilcileri olarak ortaya çıkmıştır (Kaya, 2020). Böyle bir mirastan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan liderliğindeki Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) bu popülist özellikleri devralmış ve 2001 yılında kurulmuştur (Kaya, 2020). Parti, 2002 yılında tek parti hükümeti olarak iktidara gelmiş ve önceki rejimden miras kalan liberal olmayan kurum ve uygulamalara dayanarak ayrıcalıklı elitler ile yoksun sıradan insanlar arasında bir bölünme yaratmak için popülist stratejiler kullanmıştır (Özpek & Yaşar, 2017).

İktidara geldiğinde AKP'nin siyasi duruşu hem muhafazakâr hem de liberaldir çünkü partinin siyasi söyleminin kökleri milliyetçi muhafazakârlık ve İslamcılığa dayanmakla kalmıyor, aynı zamanda uluslararası finans kuruluşlarını memnun etme taahhüdünü de içermektedir. (Öniş, 2012). Bu nedenle, AKP'nin muhafazakar demokrat bir parti olarak sınıflandırılması, liderliğinin İslami siyasi kökenlerini sürdürmesine ve aynı zamanda hem uluslararası hem de yerel otoritelerle bağlantılar kurmasına olanak tanımaktadır (Kardaş, 2008; Duran, 2008; Yıldız, 2007). Ayrıca parti, eski hükümetin politikalarına karşı dinin uygulanması konusunda özgürleştirici bir görüşe sahip olduğunu iddia etmiş ve sosyal adalet talep etmiştir. AKP liderleri dini ilkelere olan bağlılıklarını günlük yaşamlarında

göstermişlerdir ve bu durum, halkın halihazırda yasalar ve uygulamalar tarafından kısıtlanan bazı İslami yükümlülükleri yerine getirmek için daha fazla dini özgürlük arzusunu karşılamaya yönelik İslam yanlısı yaklaşımlarında da kendini göstermiştir (Kardaş, 2008). Örneğin, AKP başörtülü öğrencilerin üniversitelere girişinin yasaklanması sorununu ele almış ve İmam Hatip Okulu mezunlarına eğitim özgürlüğü tanıyarak üniversitelerde eğitimlerine devam etmelerine olanak sağlamıştır (Cizre, 2008).

AKP'nin iktidara gelişi popülist siyasetin stratejik ve başarılı bir şekilde uygulanmasıyla yakından ilişkilidir. AKP, genişletilmiş ifade özgürlüğü, devletin bütünlüğüne karşı sözlü propagandaya ceza öngören terörle mücadele hükümlerinin kaldırılması, idam cezasının kaldırılması, Kürtçe eğitim ve yayına izin verilmesi ve AB yanlısı ilişkiler sunan muhafazakâr demokrat bir siyasi parti kimliğiyle iktidara gelmiştir (Cizre, 2008, s. 2). Ancak AKP'nin siyasi söylemi, yargı ve devletteki bürokratik oligarşiden ve mutlu azınlıklar ile ayrıcalıklı sınıflara karşı "millet "in temsilinden şikâyetleri de içermektedir (Baykan, 2018). Bu doğrultuda AKP, mevcut rejimi düşük gelirli, muhafazakâr ve kırsal kesimden gelen bireylere, "hor görülenlere, kutsal duygusuyla alay edilenlere, ötekileştirilenlere ve ezilenlere" karşı önyargılı ve saygısız olmakla suçlamış ve Erdoğan'ı toplumun bu kesimlerinden gelen "halkın adamı" olarak tasvir etmiştir (Aslan, 2021, s. 8). AKP, bu tür bir popülist söylem kullanarak kendisini yozlaşmış, elitist ve seküler olduğu iddia edilen bir düzene karşı sıradan insanların sesi olarak konumlandırmıştır. Parti, statükoya meydan okumayı ve endişelerini gidermeyi vaat ederek çeşitli sosyal grupların kolektif şikâyetlerinden ustalıkla yararlanmıştır. Kendilerini sıradan vatandaşın savunucuları olarak konumlandıran ve politik söylemde sade bir dil kullanan AKP, siyasi tabanını sağlamlaştırmış ve Türkiye'de siyasette kalıcı bir varlık göstermenin yolunu açmıştır (Baykan, 2018). Bu popülist yaklaşım, partinin imajını şekillendirmede ve iktidarda kaldığı süre boyunca politikaları etkilemede önemli bir rol oynamıştır.

Türkiye'nin Temmuz 2020'de Ayasofya'yı yeniden cami olarak tanımlama kararı tartışmalara yol açması ile birlikte dönüşümü seküler rejim altında bastırılmış kimliklerinin özgürleşmesinin bir sembolü olarak gören muhafazakâr İslam yanlıları tarafından kutlanmıştır. Bununla birlikte, Halkların Demokratik Partisi milletvekilleri

başta olmak üzere, bazı siyasi aktörler tarafından Ayasofya'nın camiye dönüştürülmesi hukuki olmaktan ziyade siyasi bir karar olarak görülmüş ve Türkiye'nin geçmişiyle olan karmaşık ilişkisini vurgulamıştır (Taş, 2022). Buna göre, miras oluşturma süreçlerinde maddiyatın önemini ortaya koymaktadır ve anıtlara yapılan müdahaleler, özellikle popülist siyasette, bu sürecin hala önemli bir yönüdür (Aykaç, 2019).

METODOLOJİ

Bu çalışmada, John W. Creswell'in vaka çalışması tasarımını benimsenmiş, sağ popülizmin Ayasofya'nın camiye dönüştürülmesinin izdüşümü üzerinden tüm sembolik ve kültürel anlamları ile birlikte takip edilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Vaka çalışması yaklaşımı, sınırlı bir sistem içinde bir veya daha fazla vaka aracılığıyla araştırılan bir konunun incelenmesini içerir (Creswell & Poth, 2016, s. 73). Nitel araştırmada tek-araçlı vaka çalışması, tek-durum araştırması olarak da bilinir, tek bir bireyin ya da olayın derinlemesine analizine odaklanan bir yöntemdir (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Bu yaklaşım, özellikle benzersiz veya beklenmedik olguları keşfetmek, daha fazla araştırma yapmak ve mevcut uygulamaları sorgulamak için kullanışlıdır. Bu tezde de Ayasofya'nın dönüşümü, tek-araçlı vaka çalışması olarak kurgulanmış ve bu kapsamda üretilen politik söylem incelenmiştir.

Politik söylem analizi, söylemsel pratiklerin kamusal söylemlerdeki sosyal ve politik işlevlerine odaklanan eleştirel söylem analizi ile yakından ilişkilidir.. Eleştirel söylem analizine göre söylem, bir sosyal eylem ve etkileşim biçimidir (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Boden & Zimmennan, 1991; Van Dijk, 1985). Tahakküm ve eşitsizliğin metin ve konuşma yoluyla nasıl yürürlüğe konulduğu, yeniden üretildiği, meşrulaştırıldığı ve bunlara nasıl direndiği, eleştirel söylem analizi aracılığıyla incelenir (Van Dijk, 2015). Dolayısıyla, eleştirel söylem analizinin odak noktası, baskının dilsel tahakküm biçimidir (Fairclough, 1995). Buna göre iktidar, hem söylemsel olayların katılımcıları arasındaki eşitsizliklere hem de belirli sosyokültürel bağlamlarda metnin üretimi, dağıtımı ve tüketimi üzerindeki eşitsiz kontrol oranlarına göre kavramsallaştırılır (Fairclough, 1995, s. 1-2)

Bu çalışmada, eleştirel söylem analizi için Metinsel analiz için iki veri kaynağı seçilmiştir. İlk kaynak olan parlamento oturumları, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi'nde milletvekilleri tarafından yapılan konuşmalardan oluşmaktadır. İkinci kaynak ise Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan da dahil olmak üzere çeşitli siyasetçi ve bakanların TRT, Yeni Şafak ve Türkiye olmak üzere üç çevrimiçi medya kaynağında yer alan açıklamalarını içeren medyadan elde edilen metinsel ve sözlü materyaldir. Her iki kaynaktaki tüm materyaller, Ayasofya'nın camiye dönüştürülmesine ilişkin tartışmaların en yoğun olduğu 1 Haziran 2020 ile 15 Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasındaki dönemden seçilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, temel araştırma sorusu aşağıdaki gibidir: AKP, Ayasofya'nın yeniden camiye dönüştürülmesine ilişkin popülist stratejileri nasıl kullanmaktadır? Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, popülizme yönelik teorik yaklaşımlar ile Türkiye'de süregelen popülist politikalar arasındaki ilişkiyi ve bu ilişkilerin Ayasofya örneğindeki izdüşümlerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çerçevede, popülizm, "halk ve öteki" ayrımı, milli irade, önceki düzen karşıtı siyaset, karizmatik liderlik ve ulusal miras gibi öne çıkan kavramlar Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüştürülmesi üzerinden sorunsallaştırılmaktadır.

Veri toplama, çoğunlukla çevrimiçi çeşitli metinler üzerinden tematik bir aramayı içermektedir. Meclis konuşmaları, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi web sitesinde bulunan meclis tutanaklarından seçilmiştir. "Ayasofya" anahtar kelimesi 01 Haziran 2020 - 15 Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasında yayınlanan tutanaklarda aranmış ve anahtar kelimeyi içeren konuşmalar analiz için seçilmiştir. Toplamda 18 meclis tutanağından 64 meclis konuşması üzerinden metinsel analiz gerçekleştirilmiştir. Ayrıca, aynı tarihlerde yayınlanan ve siyasilerin Ayasofya'nın yeniden ibadete açılmasıyla ilgili konuşmalarını içeren haberler TRT Haber, Yeni Şafak ve Türkiye gazetelerinden seçilmiştir. Haberlerden toplamda 50 konuşma seçilerek analiz edilmiştir. Seçilen materyallerin kodlanması ve analizi MAXQDA24 aracılığıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. İki kaynaktan gelen veriler üzerinde hem ayrı ayrı hem de iki kaynak birleştirilmiş olarak açık kodlama yapılmıştır. Veri analizi, ilgili temaların birbirleri ile hizalanmasına göre tematik kümeler oluşturmayı sağlamıştır. Siyasi söylemin üç boyutu, metin, etkileşim ve bağlam, eleştirel söylem analizinin üç

aşaması (tanımlama, yorumlama ve açıklama) aracılığıyla tematik kümelerle ilişkili olarak sunulmuştur.

BULGULAR VE TARTIŞMA

Seçilen konuşmaların eleştirel söylem analizine göre konuşmalar, söylemsel seçiciliklerin ve stratejilerin yoğunlaştığı dokuz tema etrafında düzenlenmiştir. Bu temalar, ulusal miras, karizmatik liderlik, dini milliyetçilik, halk-merkezcilik, egemenlik, biz ve onlar, geçmişten gelen hınç, önceki düzen karşıtlığı ve demokrasi talebi olarak belirlenmiştir. Hepsini birbiriyle ilişkili olsa da temaların birbirleri olan hizalanmaların yapısı anlamsal özellikleri aracılığıyla tematik kümelemeye izin vermiştir. Buna göre, dört tematik küme ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) Popülist Tarihsel/Milliyetçi Temellendirme, (2) Popülist Temsil, (3) Popülist Mit Oluşturma ve (4) Popülist Lider.

Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüşümünün tarihsel ve ulusal temellendirmesi, AKP'nin Osmanlı geçmişinin yeniden canlandırılmasına ilişkin popülist politikaları kullanmasıyla ilişkilidir. Metin analizine göre, "ulusal miras", "geçmişten gelen hınç", "önceki düzen karşıtlığı" ve "dini milliyetçilik" temalarının birbiriyle yakından ilişkili olduğu görülmüştür. Aralarındaki ilişki, ulusal mirasın diğer temalarla ilgisi bakımından araçsallaştırılmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Önceki düzene -ki bu durumda Kemalist değerlere dayanan seküler düzen söz konusudur- yönelik eleştiriler ve halkın Kemalist rejimle ilgili mağduriyetleri, Osmanlı geçmişini öne çıkaran bir tarihsel temellendirme süreciyle yansıtılmıştır. Dini milliyetçilik, İslam'ın değerlerini ulusun temel değerleri olarak vurgulamak ve bir "kültürel homojenlik duygusu" yaratmak için böyle bir sürece dahil edilmiştir (Kaya, 2021). Böylece, yeniden dönüşümün siyasi gündemi, kolektif bir mağduriyet duygusu yaratmak ve önceden kurulmuş rejimin seküler politikalarına karşı kızgınlığı beslemek için ulusal mirasın araçsallaştırılması yoluyla pekiştirilmiştir.

Dönüşümün popülist temellendirmesi, Ayasofya'nın dönüşümüne ilişkin söylemde Kemalist rejim ile AKP hükümeti arasında karşıtlık yaratmak için kullanılan tarihsel ve ulusal değerleri temsil etmektedir. Dolayısıyla, siyasi metnin ve konuşmanın deneyimsel, ilişkisel ve dışavurumcu değerlerinin tümü bu varlıklar arasında inşa edilen çatışmayla bağlantılıdır. Kemalist rejim Türkiye halkını ve İslam'ı mağdur eden bir rejim olarak tasvir

edilirken, AKP hükümeti ise özgürleştiren ve ortak mirası koruyan bir yönetim olarak sunulmuştur. Bu kavramsallaştırmanın kökleri Türkiye’de popülizmin yükselişinin dört koşuluna dayanmaktadır. Ekonomik ve sosyal krizler, siyasi arenada temsil ve yanlış temsil sorunu, yerleşik siyasi sisteme duyulan güvensizlik ve Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın kendisini Kemalist Cumhuriyet'in elitlerinin aksine bir halk adamı olarak tasvir etmesi, yeniden dönüşüm için tarihsel ve ulusal temellerin araçsallaştırılmasında kristalize olmuştur. Buna göre popülist politikaların şiddeti, insanların belirli şikayetleri, arzuları ve ihtiyaçları olduğu, ancak neyin eksik olduğunu tam olarak bilmedikleri yerlerde zirveye ulaşmaktadır (Panizza, 2005). Ayasofya'nın tarihsel ve milliyetçi temeller ile temellendirildiği politik söylem, AKP'nin iktidara geldiği 2000'li yıllara dayanmakta ve bir kurgu olmaktan ziyade o dönemde halkın şikâyet, arzu ve ihtiyaçlarını yansıtmaktadır. Halkın popülist temsili, siyasi bir çağrının belirli bir tarzı olarak (Ostiguy, 2021), "egemenlik", "biz ve onlar", "demokrasi talebi" ve "halk-merkezcilik" temalarının yakın uyumuyla kavramsallaştırılmıştır. Buna göre, egemenliğin kimin elinde olduğu ve ne üzerinde uygulandığı soruları, yeniden dönüşüm durumunda biz ve onlar ayrımıyla yakından bağlantılıdır. Böyle bir ayrıma ilişkin siyasi söylem kaçınılmaz olarak halk merkezli siyasetle bağlantılıdır ve "onlar" olarak kurgulanan yıkıcı güçlere karşı egemen halkın çıkarlarını korumak ve iradesine saygı göstermek için politika yapma iddiasındadır. Böyle bir siyaset aynı zamanda egemen halk için demokrasinin sağlanmasına atıfta bulunur ve halkın kim olduğu "biz" söylemi etrafında şekillendiği için popülist temsilin önünü açar.

Yeniden dönüşüm vakasındaki popülist temsil, popülist liderlerin kötü niyetli toplumsal düşmanlara karşı gerçek halkı temsil ettiklerini iddia ettikleri çağrılarının etkinliğine bağlı olarak performatif popülizmi işaret etmektedir (Ostiguy, 2017). Dışlayıcı çerçeveleme, Türk-Müslüman halk ile hem iç hem de dış aktörler, sekülerler ve Rumlar da dahil olmak üzere halka karşı olarak algılananlar arasındaki bir savaşı tasvir etmek için uygulanmıştır. Bu anlatı, dönüşümün Türkiye'nin İslami kimliğini korumak için gerekli olduğu fikrini pekiştirmiştir. Performatif yaklaşımla bağlantılı olarak, dönüşüm vakası popülist liderlerin sıklıkla "halkın gerçek iradesini" temsil ettiklerini iddia ettikleri özgünlük ve

doğrudanlığı da içermektedir. AKP hükümeti yeniden dönüşümü halkın İslami mirasını geri alma arzusunun bir yansıması olarak sunmuştur. Bu anlatı hükümeti halkın gerçek sesi olarak konumlandırmıştır. Buna göre, bu tür bir temsil duygusal çekicilik ve çağrı içermektedir ve AKP hükümeti karara destek sağlamak için bu duyarlılıktan yararlanmıştır.

Anlatı, performatif yaklaşımın bir boyutu olarak (Ostiguy, 2017), tarihi zaferin değeri üzerinden inşa edilmiş ve yeniden dönüşüm, kutsal bir mekanın hak ettiği yere geri getirilmesi olarak sunulmuştur. Böyle bir anlatı, AKP'nin halkın dini ve kültürel isteklerinin savunucusu olarak konumunu sağlamlaştırmaya yardımcı olmuştur. Dolayısıyla, özneler arasındaki ilişkiler ve söylemin özneler arasında olup bitenlerle bağlantısı popülist söylemin karşıt taraflar olarak "halk-öteki" ve "AKP-Cumhuriyet Rejimi" ikilikleri arasındaki ilişkiselliği yaratmadaki rolü nedeniyle birbirinden ayıramaz. AKP, ulusal birlik duygusu uyandırmak ve muhalefeti marjinalize etmek için tasarlanmış stratejiler ve söylemler kullanmıştır ve dönüşüm kararını halkın iradesinin bir yansıması olarak çerçeveleyerek tartışmalı bir hamleyi meşrulaştırmayı ve gücünü pekiştirmeyi amaçlamıştır.

AKP siyasetinde Osmanlı geçmişinin kristalleşmesi olarak tanımlanan mit yaratma sürecinin (Kaya, 2021) "demokrasi talebi", "ulusal miras", "önceki düzen karşıtı söylem" ve "dini milliyetçilik" temalarının yakın hizalanması yoluyla yansıtıldığı görülmüştür. Popülist mit oluşturma, demokratik ideali milliyetçi ve İslamcı değerlerle birleştirerek, milliyetçi/tarihsel temellendirme ile halkın temsilinin birleşimini yansıtmaktadır. Böyle bir süreç, cumhuriyetin seküler perspektifine bir alternatif önermektedir. Sonuç olarak, AKP'nin popülist siyaseti kullanımı, yeni Osmanlı duygularını canlandırarak halkı cezbetmeyi içeren siyasi anlatısında ve kamusal söyleminde görülebilir (Theodorou, 2022). Din temelli popülist söylem, AKP tarafından eski siyasi stratejilerin işe yaramadığı bir noktada siyasi bir hamle olarak kullanılmıştır. Dolayısıyla, yeniden dönüşümü kutsamak için dini zeminin araçsallaştırılması popülist siyasetin bir biçimi olmuştur. Özneler arasındaki ilişkiye dair siyasi söylemin, Türkiye'nin emperyal geçmişine dair mit yaratma anlatıları aracılığıyla onları "halk" haline getirerek birleştirici bir işleve sahip

olduğu görünmektedir. Popülist siyasetin etkisi, aktarılan ya da somutlaştırılan bu anlatılara ve halkın tepkilerine bağlı olmuştur (Panizza, 2005). Ancak halkın bu anlatılara nasıl tepki verdiği de popülist lidere bağlıdır. Liderlik ve karar alma biçimi, “basit siyasi çekicilik” ve çağrı ile (Westheuser & Ostiguy, 2024) ilişkili olarak, kişisel bir model olarak sunulmuştur.

Popülist temsil ve mit yaratımının ana figürü olarak popülist lider, "karizmatik liderlik", "halk merkezlik" ve "geçmişten gelen hınç" temalarının yakın olarak hizalanmasına göre kavramsallaştırılmıştır. Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüştürülmesi örneğinde, "halk" inşasının temellerinin Türkçü-İslamcı gelenekten alındığı görülmüştür. Bu çerçevede halk-merkezlik, Müslüman-Türk milletinin değerleri, arzuları ve iradesi ile şikâyet ve kırgınlıkları doğrultusunda politikalar ve siyasi anlatılar üretmeyi yansıtmaktadır. Erdoğan'ın liderliği hem politik-stratejik hem de performatif anlamdaki popülist liderliği yansıtmaktadır; bu liderlikte politik karizma, “basit politik çekicilik” yoluyla halkla kurulan doğrudan ilişki üzerinden inşa edilmektedir. Erdoğan'ın siyasi karizması, nedensel bir şekilde kendi biyografisinden değil, biyografisi ile toplumun tarihi arasındaki diyalektik ilişkiden kaynaklansa da halkı yeniden dönüşümü desteklemek üzere harekete geçirmiştir. Bu anlamda, bu tezin benimsediği ilişkiyel diyalektik söylem analizi yaklaşımı, diğer tüm tematik kümelerde olduğu gibi, söylemin durumsal bağlamla ilişkisine ve yeniden üretimine işaret etmektedir.

Yeniden dönüşümü çevreleyen söylemin eleştirel bir analizi üç temel boyutu ortaya koymaktadır: metinsel, metinlerarası ve bağlamsal. Metinsel düzeyde, AKP güçlü ve duygusal olarak yankı uyandıran bir anlatı yaratmak için bir dizi retorik stratejisi kullanmıştır. "İkinci fetih" ve "köklerimize dönüş" gibi metaforlar tarihsel önem ve ulusal gurur duygusu uyandırmıştır. "Halk" ve "ulus" gibi kapsayıcı dil, birlik ve aidiyet duygusunu teşvik ederek geniş bir kitleye hitap ederken, insanları "ayağa kalkmaya" ve "mirasımızı savunmaya" çağıran teşvik edici dil, harekete geçmeye ilham verdi ve bir aciliyet duygusu yarattı. Belirli grupların dışlanması, popülist biz ve onlar ayrımıyla algılanan bir düşmanı ima ederek siyasi söylem aracılığıyla da kullanılmıştır. Metinlerarası bir yaklaşımla, AKP yeniden dönüşümü meşrulaştırmak ve daha geniş bir

kitleye hitap etmek için tarihsel referanslardan ve dini metinlerden yararlanmıştır. Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve Fatih Sultan Mehmet'e yapılan atıflar dönüşümü şanlı bir geçmişe bağlarken, dini metinler de dönüşümün dini önemini pekiştirmiştir. Dahası, AKP medya ortamını kontrol ederek mesajının yaygın ve tartışmasız bir şekilde yayılmasını sağlamıştır.

Bağlamsal düzeyde, dönüşüm söylemi mevcut güç ilişkilerini pekiştirmek ve muhalefeti marjinalleştirmek için kullanılmıştır. AKP kendisini halkın meşru sesi olarak sunarken, muhaliflerini elitist ve anti-demokratik olarak tasvir etmiştir. Buna ek olarak, yeniden dönüşüm, İslami mirasa ve Osmanlı mirasına dayanan ulusal kimliği yeniden inşa etmek ve güçlendirmek, ortak bir amaç ve aidiyet duygusunu teşvik etmek için kullanılmıştır. Ancak özelde dönüşümün desteklenmesi, genelde ise Türkiye'deki popülist siyaset sadece lider odaklı olarak değerlendirilemez. Dönüşüme ilişkin siyasi söylem, Türkiye'nin tarihine, mevcut grup farklılıklarına, kimliklere ve kırgınlıklara dayanan içeriklerin ve öznelerin etkileşimi yoluyla ilişkisel olarak inşa edilmiştir. Dolayısıyla yeniden dönüşümün temellendirilmesi, ortak değerleri ve kültürel mirası paylaşan Türk-Müslüman topluluğu olarak birleşik halkın yeniden inşasını gerektirmiştir. Sosyo-politik bir kurgu olarak halk, hem dönüşümü milli iradenin bir eylemi olarak temellendirmek hem de bu iradenin karşısındaki iç ve dış düşmanı yeniden inşa etmek için kullanılmıştır. Türk-Müslüman toplumunun dış güçlere veya onların içerideki işbirlikçilerine karşıt inşası, popülizme söylemsel yaklaşımı yansıtmıştır. Ancak bu inşa Ayasofya meselesinin ötesinde, tarihsel ve toplumsal olarak Türkiye siyasetinde temellenmiştir. AKP'nin iktidara geldiğinden bu yana izlediği elitizm ve önceki düzen karşıtı politikaları, inşa edilen düşmanın her türlü muhalefeti hedef almasıyla sonuçlanmış, ortak düşman ise Türkiye'nin bağımsızlığını tehdit eden dış güçler ve onların yerli işbirlikçileri olarak gösterilmiştir. Dolayısıyla Ayasofya'nın yeniden ibadete açılması, Türkiye siyasetindeki biz ve onlar ikiliğinin sadece bir örneğidir.

SONUÇ

Ayasofya'nın 2020 yılında cami olarak yeniden ibadete açılması, iktidardaki Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin neo-Osmanlıcı ve İslamcı gündeminin güçlü bir sembolü olarak

Türkiye siyasetinde önemli bir olay olmuştur. Bu çalışma, popülist siyasetin yeniden dönüşümü çevreleyen söylemi şekillendirmedeki rolünü ve AKP'nin seçmenin desteğini harekete geçirmek, iktidarını meşrulaştırmak ve ulusal kimliği yeniden inşa etmek için popülist stratejileri nasıl kullandığını incelemiştir. Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüştürülmesi popülizm, milliyetçilik ve dini duyarlılıklar gibi çeşitli faktörler tarafından şekillendirilen siyasi bir olaydır. AKP'nin popülist stratejileri kullanması, dönüşümün dört söylemsel kategoride analiz edilmesini sağlamıştır: (1) Popülist Tarihsel/Milliyetçi Temellendirme, (2) Popülist Temsil, (3) Popülist Mit Oluşturma ve (4) Popülist Lider.

Yeniden dönüşümü çevreleyen söylemin ana teması, tarihsel bir mağduriyet duygusunun yaratılmasıdır. AKP, Kemalist rejimi İslami kimliği bastırmaya ve Osmanlı mirasını silmeye çalışan düşman bir güç olarak tasvir etmiştir. Bu nedenle, dönüşüm, İstanbul'un "ikinci fethi" ve Atatürk'ün seküler mirasına karşı sembolik bir zafer olarak çerçevelenmiştir. Dönüşüm söylemi, salt milliyetçi boyutlarının ötesinde, daha geniş insan hakları ve demokrasi konularını da kapsayacak şekilde genişletilmiştir. Böylece, AKP, Ayasofya'yı hem Türk milliyetçiliğinin hem de İslami mirasın bir sembolü olarak konumlandırarak çok çeşitli seçmen kitlelerine hitap etmeye çalışmıştır. Bu hem Türkleri hem de Müslümanları kapsayan ve aynı zamanda her tür muhalif grubu dışlayan muğlak ve kapsayıcı bir "halk" kavramının inşa edilmesini gerektirmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma Ayasofya'nın yeniden dönüştürülmesinin yalnızca mekânsal veya kültürel bir değişim olmadığını, iktidar partisinin popülist gündeminin bir sonucu olduğunu savunmaktadır. Dönüşüm, AKP iktidarı altındaki Türkiye'de popülist siyasetin bir örneği olmuş ve siyasi lider ile verili toplumun tarihsel koşulları arasındaki ilişkiyi dinamikleri yansıtmıştır. Sonuç olarak, bu tez, siyasi söylemin araçsallığını ve Ayasofya'nın yeniden inşasında yatan sembolik anlamı inceleyerek popülist siyaset üzerine mevcut literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

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