

The Authoritarian Shift of the Populist Discourse in Turkey

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olitical leaders and parties tend to construct or change their populist discourses during election periods or following economic or political crises (Moffit, *ibid.*), and in the majority of cases, they are supported by pro-government media elites. This paper attempts to show how the crisis caused by the Gezi protests of June 2013 sparked a turning point in the Erdoğanist discourse and how some columnists have endeavored to promulgate this change. Most Gezi protest studies have emphasized the diversity of the social groups/movements that met in the park (Göle, 2014) or the role of social media like Twitter and Facebook in the mobilization of citizens (Özkırımlı 2014; Tüfekçi, 2017), but few have focused on the role of pro-government media elites or Internet users in producing a populist discourse (Özbudun, 2015; Bulut & Yörük, 2017).

In May 2013, the modest protests of environmental activists, who wanted to prevent the destruction of Gezi Park and the conversion of the area in central Istanbul into a shopping mall, quickly transmuted into significant opposition to Erdoğan, the PM at the time. His persistence in relation to this project, his rejection of the court decision to halt the park's destruction and subsequent police brutality exacerbated the protests (Konda

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Gezi Report, June 5, 2014). The protesters occupied the park for two weeks and during this time media elites played an important role. The Justice and Development Party (JDP or AK Parti) utilized the protests to consolidate its electoral base by stigmatizing the protesters as an anti-religious elite that was collaborating with Western countries in an attempt to arrange a coup against Turkey. Almost five years after the protests, some activists were indicted again in 2017, with Erdoğan accusing them in public speeches and trying to stigmatize certain executives and celebrities as leaders or sponsors of the protests (Daragahi, 2018).

Despite the significant number of studies that have attempted to analyze the factors that triggered the Gezi protests through the use of different theoretical frameworks (Özkırımlı, 2014) or via empirical research focusing on the activists' identities, their political commitment and motivations (Farro & Demirhisar, 2014; Ünan, 2015), most journalistic research has generally focused on the coverage of the protests by the mainstream media (Özel & Deniz, 2015) or on the mobilization of the activists on social networks (Tüfekçi 2017). There are also some studies that analyze pro-JDP columnists' and journalists' discourses on the Gezi protests and show how these "organic intellectuals of the party" contributed to the construction of the Gezi protests as an "attempted coup against Erdoğan and his leadership" (Özbudun, S., 2015) without referring to the concept of populism or populist discourse.

This research is drawn in part from a PhD dissertation on the generations of political columnists in Turkey focusing on their stance vis-à-vis the protests and on the discourse they constructed throughout the protests. The dissertation is based on a mixed methodology formed by discourse analysis and in-depth-interviews with 40 columnists who shared their political opinions between 2013 and 2016.¹ In Turkey, columnists have always been part of power elites (Mills, 1956) and their numbers have progressively increased, particularly since the 1980s with an increase in external investment in the journalistic field by businessmen, owners of energy companies and banks. Already during the era of Turgut Özal's presidency (who gave interviews directly to *columnists* instead of *political journalists*) these were seen to enjoy close ties with the political elite and considered themselves to be part of the power elite (Bali, 1999). Today, their interventions in public debates are not limited to their columns; they are also the most frequent guests on TV shows and have more followers on social media when compared to ordinary reporters. This article, inasmuch as it emphasizes

the transformation of populist discourse, will focus on the columns and in-depth-interviews of the Islamist-conservative or right-wing columnists (14 of 40 columnists interviewed). When necessary, it will also draw on quotes from left-wing columnists in order to describe the newsroom atmosphere that they witnessed in religious media outlets. With respect to the discourse analysis, in the initial phase of the research, I studied 252 columns of 32 interviewed columnists written in June 2013. These columnists did continue to discuss the Gezi protests afterwards through the lens of other national or international political developments, such as the coup in Egypt² or the corruption scandal of 17-25 December.³ This latter episode occurred between the religious Gülen community, which exercised considerable influence within the police, judicial and military establishments, and pro-Erdoğan politicians. As a result of these events, an additional 250 columns written before December 31, 2013 became part of the sample. Most of the columnists were nonetheless keen that their anonymity be maintained as this allowed them to express themselves comfortably and openly.⁴ In consequence, when quoting columns, the author relied on those of non-interviewed columnists or avoided mentioning any link between the column and the interviewed columnists.

In order to analyze the discourse of columnists, the author relied on discourse analysis theories that underlie the characteristics of populist discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Charaudeau, 2011; Wodak, 2015). Laclau (2005) describes the people or the nation as an "empty signifier," which is defined by the logic of equivalence, homogenizing social demands. This logic of equivalence operates simultaneously with the definition of the "other," an enemy that prevents the people from satisfying their needs and their demands.

Charaudeau (2011) emphasizes that populist discourse consists of three stages: (a) providing proof that society is convulsed by difficulties, and that the citizen is the first victim; (b) determining the source of the problem and who is responsible—the adversary; and (c) announcing what the solution is, and who can deliver it. In 2013, in the context of the Gezi demonstrations and the coup in Egypt, Erdoğan and pro-government columnists (a) tried to prove that the Gezi movement was not meant to defend the park or to prevent its destruction, but was intended to overthrow the government or at least Erdoğan; (b) argued that "this plot" was organized by foreign forces and local collaborators in order to constrain Turkey's economic development; and (c) argued that Erdoğan and his stance against

external and internal enemies would save the nation.

Furthermore, the discourse historical approach (DHA) that Wodak (2015) adopted for analyzing right-wing populist parties and their leaders influenced this study. The DHA mainly consists of two levels: the entry-level, which focuses on the thematic dimension of texts, and second, the in-depth analysis, which evaluates discursive strategies and argumentation schemes as well as other linguistic elements. In her study, Wodak made use of the term “*topos*,” which is a strategy of argumentation. She detected several content-related strategies (*topos*) of argumentation that stand out in right-wing populist parties’ or leaders’ speeches such as the *topos* of “threat or danger,” “people,” “advantage/usefulness,” “savior,” etc. The author identified two main strategies/*topos* of argumentation proper to right-wing populist discourse in columnists’ articles on the Gezi protests that contributed to the media construction of Erdoğan’s charisma: (a) an anti-Western sense fed by a desire to change the balance of regional power, and (b) a definition of “people” based on the different categories of “we” and “others”: secular-Muslim; Western-indigenous; elite/intellectual-people; Sunnite-Alewi; or nation-internal/domestic enemy as per the terms of Carl Schmitt (2007, p.46). This paper will focus only on the anti-elitist feature of the populist discourse and leave aside an analysis of its nationalist and religious aspects.

Before presenting the details and the output of the study, I will try to distinguish the populist discourse of the post-Gezi era from those of Turkey’s other populist parties and also from the JDP’s earlier era itself.

DEFINING THE JDP’S POPULISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

Although the terms “populist” “populism” or even “people” are deeply ambiguous for theorists working on different aspects of populism in various countries, they have reached a consensus with respect to certain characteristics of populism and its incipient drivers: its emergence following a political or economic crisis (Moffit, *ibid.*); the presence of a charismatic leader (Taguieff, 2007); opposition to the establishment; an outsider, who makes a populist speech or adopts a populist policy (Wiley, 1969); a speech, in general nationalist or populist, that appeals to the people—defined according to the type of populism (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969); and anti-elitism as an element of the systematic an-

ti-pluralism of populism (Müller, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The JDP and the discourse of its news media can therefore be described as “populist” for a number of reasons.

The JDP came to power following the economic crisis of 2001 by presenting itself as being very much apart from the political system that gave rise to the crisis, but also as a potential savior (Aytaç & Öniş, 2014.) The subsequent reforms in the areas of social security and health advanced the socio-economic conditions of lower income groups, long neglected by previous political parties (Buğra & Keyder 2006), and served to strengthen the party’s grip on power. The populism of the JDP and its leader can be seen to vary from one era to the other, however. The populism of the JDP from 2002-2010, when the party was still considered a victim of military power, differs markedly from that of the Arab Uprisings era when the Turkish model was promoted by Western leaders and journalists for Arab countries (Tuğal, 2016). This liberal Islamic populism of the JDP came to an end by 2013 (Açikel, 2016; Tuğal, 2016). Some scholars working on this issue (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016) have called this model of governance “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2010) and agree that it took shape during the Arab Uprisings. For others, whose principal focus is Turkey, the 2013 Gezi Park Protests were only one of several factors, along with the failure of the Kurdish peace process and the collapse of the regional order in the Middle East with the Arab uprisings (in particular in Syria), accelerating the majoritarian populist shift of politics in Turkey (Grigoriadis, 2018). The Gezi protests triggered another shift in this governance model by transforming it into an authoritarian populist one that personalizes power. For example, founding members of the party such as Bülent Arınç and the president of that era Abdullah Gül, who had until then criticized the party’s policies and reacted more permissively towards the Gezi protesters, were forced to quietly relinquish their seats. The personalization of the leadership, also considered to be one of the main elements of populism (Taggart, 1995), became more explicit in the person of Erdoğan. Although this issue had not garnered attention prior to the Gezi protests, some scholars began to define all of these elements as Erdoğanism (Insel & Bora, 2016; Dedeoğlu & Aksakal, 2015). This process of personalization accelerated after the 2015 parliamentary elections and in the wake of the forced resignation of the PM, Davutoğlu, who was accused of failures in relation to his foreign policy. It also took on a more systematic and administrative form after the abortive coup of July 2016, with the president promulgating decrees that led to the purge of some 114, 279 peo-

ple from public institutions and to their passports being revoked (Akdeniz & Altıparmak, 2018). Journalists and academics who opposed government policy were stigmatized on the basis of their affiliation with different illegal organizations, with many subsequently dismissed from their organizations.

Some liberal intellectuals, who were constant in their support of the JDP between 2002 - 2010, then became fierce critics of the party even before the Gezi protests (Ersoy & Üstüner, 2016). However, in the aftermath of nationwide protests, the JDP suppressed critical coverage through legal encroachments, the prosecution of media professionals and the withholding of state largess (Yeşil, 2018). It pushed the media owners to fire journalists and columnists who had either supported the protests or criticized the government. One hundred and forty-three journalists were either fired or forced to resign because of their reporting of the Gezi protests despite pressure not to publish. In 2014, the number of journalists dismissed from their posts rose to 339 (Bianet, 2015). The number of journalists who have been jailed has likewise continued to increase; in 2016 *Reporters without Borders* (RSF) ranked Turkey 157th out of 180 countries in its world press freedom index (RSF, 2016). *Freedom House's* report of 2018 changed Turkey's status from "partly free" to "not free" (Freedom House, 2018). Though the protests per se did not mark the beginning of the crackdown on liberal intellectuals, they were a turning point for most of them insofar as most were also part of the secular media elite, which had become the target of the new populist discourse.

Since the Gezi protests, the JDP has mobilized trolls on social networks such as Twitter to defend its policies, and this populist language also impacts pro-JDP journalists and columnists (Bulut & Yörük, 2017). "Aktrolls"⁵ have also served to reduce discourses on social media that are critical of the government, especially since the Gezi protests (Saka, 2018). For instance, some Aktrolls were vocal in their support of Erdoğan during the resignation of Prime Minister Davutoğlu, thanks to a blog entitled *Pelikan Dosyası* (*Pelican Brief*, in a reference to the Hollywood movie) where they anonymously criticized Davutoğlu's policies and his stance against Erdoğan (Yeşil, Sözeri & Khazraee, 2017).

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LEADER'S CHARISMA: ERDOĞAN VS. WESTERN PLOTTERS

The media construction of Erdoğan's charisma is essentially based on a personalization process. In

fact, Erdoğan had already begun to build his charismatic persona prior to the Gezi protests. However, up to that point, a political crisis or a social movement had never called his authority into question. Erdoğan took advantage of Gezi's demonstrations, which were, for him, an opportunity to re-establish his charisma (Bora, 2017).

Yalçın Akdoğan, who has been a columnist for the pro-government newspaper, *Star*, wrote a book entitled *Political Leadership and Erdoğan* (2013). Akdoğan had been a deputy and then deputy prime minister of the JDP in the past. In his book, he explains, on the one hand, how Erdoğan takes advantage of polls during electoral campaigns to modify his political discourse. On the other hand, he repeatedly points out that Erdoğan does not follow populist policies, but simply adopts the position of the people against the elites (Akdoğan, *ibid.*). During an interview in relation to his book, Akdoğan listed the Gezi protests among other social events as having contributed significantly to Erdoğan's charisma (Özkan, *Star*, March 5, 2017).

Behind the scenes, there were significant reasons underlying the push to enhance Erdoğan's charisma during the Gezi protests. One of the interviewees, a left-wing columnist, who had worked for the religious pro-government newspaper, *Yenişafak*, witnessed many newsroom discussions during the Gezi protests before he was dismissed. He describes the moment of change in how the newspaper's managers perceived events:

During the protests, in some editorial meetings, the directors of Yenişafak claimed: 'It is a matter of life or death for us.'

(Author): What does that mean to them?

This was the timeline: in early May (2013) Erdoğan visited Obama. They were scolded there. Particularly Hakan Fidan (Head of the MIT- National Intelligence Agency) who was scolded. They (the US Government) said, 'We know what you are doing in Syria.' There, Erdoğan and his team had the impression that 'the West wants to overthrow them.' Then the process against Morsi in Egypt that began simultaneously with the Gezi protests was perceived as being interconnected by the JDP. Moreover, we saw the reflections of this perception in the headlines. They said, 'They want to overthrow us, so we have counter this by every means possible. This is a question of life or death.' (Former left-wing columnist of *Yenişafak*, 47 years old, interviewed on 11.05.2015, in Istanbul)

Indeed, the argument, or as per Wodak (2015), the topos, of threat or danger and that of the savior leader prevailed in the articles of pro-government columnists. Yasin Aktay, the prime minister's advisor on human rights, columnist and deputy of the JDP since 2011, defines charisma based on Ibn Khaldun's political philosophy. He admits that a leader's charisma and especially that of Erdoğan, is a "fortune" (*talih*), which excites members of any given organization and according to him, represents "an emotional energy and intelligence produced in the harsh conditions of crisis in opposition to modern bureaucracy that seeks to destroy this energy" (Quoted by Bora, 2017). In the eyes of his voters, the cult of Erdoğan was reinforced by the resolute attitude he adopted, first of all during the Gezi demonstrations and then during the corruption investigations (December 17 – 25, 2013). Erdoğan's stand against the alleged "Western plotters" proved to be particularly effective in reinforcing this charisma:

When we take a closer look at the operation (corruption investigations) in detail, we see that we are facing the design of a political (world) without Erdoğan, because Turkey, where the will of the people was omitted and Erdoğan eliminated, would be open to projects outside of politics, with infamous organizations set up under the control of the Neo-Cons and the Israeli lobby. The gang of international destruction, who planned this coup attempt for a polity without Tayyip Erdoğan knows very well that Tayyip Erdoğan is a point of resistance, not only in Turkey, but also in all the Islamic regions from Egypt to Syria, from Palestine to Africa. (Ocaktan, Akşam, December 27, 2013)

In the narratives of these media elites, he is described as the representative of the "nation" and its protector as the democratically elected prime minister. In this sense, the protests also affected the nation. This personalization of the national will was part of a populist strategy (Taggart, *ibid*). As such, Islamist and right-wing columnists, who perceived the protests as a coup, also contributed in their way to this personalization process by comparing Erdoğan to other national or international leaders and singling out his strengths against those Western leaders and organizations:

For the first time I write about Erdoğan with a serene and clean style. I have to do it; because in a period when Turkey and the region have reached a critical point, he is 'the only man' who is resisting the pressures of the global system and its games and the only one who repels them.

Because the only person who deciphers the codes of the guardianship system at national and global levels and who obtains a degree of symbolic power, thus breaking this double siege, is Erdoğan.

Because 'Erdoğan' is more than Erdoğan: just like the late Erbakan and Abdülhamid (II), Erdoğan has become a symbol. During my travels to Indonesia, Yemen, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the Balkans and the Arab world; through interviews with the people and leaders, I observed or noted that Erdoğan was more than Erdoğan. (...) Do not forget! Like all kinds of symbols, the symbolic characters do not belong only to their time: they go beyond the present reality, they open the door to a journey that will surpass time and space. (...) It is for this reason that I say 'Erdoğan is more than Erdoğan.' (Kaplan, Yenişafak, December 15, 2013)

Since the protests, the personalization of the leader's charisma has been regularly reproduced by government media elites referring to his past activities and positive image in the eyes of Middle East societies. It also evokes Bourdieu's "oracle effect" (Bourdieu, 1994) through which the spokesperson gives voice to the group in whose name s/he speaks by abolishing himself. He thus becomes nothing but the delegate of the God or the People, and the name, which s/he invokes, is everything, and on this account, s/he is everything:

For me, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the hope of the massacred Muslims in Myanmar, the voice of the response to Israel in Davos, the famous 'One Minute.' When babies are slaughtered with chemicals in Syria, when Morsi is imprisoned in Egypt, he was the voice of humanity. That's why Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not only a leader for us; he is the voice of the orphans in Gaza and the hope of the youth at Arakan. (Selvi, Yenişafak, November 26, 2013)

The protests in Egypt against Mohammed Morsi's government (closely linked with the Muslim Brotherhood movement) that occurred simultaneously with those in Istanbul and the coup attempt following these protests, deeply affected the pro-government columnists. Most of them preferred to argue about the role of Western countries and especially that of the US in provoking the protests:

We understand better day after day that Gezi was 'an attempt whose idea comes from the

*United States.' I am not part of an intellectual milieu that looks to see the involvement of the United States or Jewish capital in every event. That does not stop me, though, from seeing the influence of the United States or the contribution of Israel. I am not so naive as to ignore the links behind the coup in Egypt and to insist that Gezi is the work of the flower children*6. (Selvi, *Yenişafak*, September 22, 2013)

There are two main argumentations evident in the writings of columnists that make reference either to the July coup in Egypt or to other Muslim countries, and both recall for us the discursive strategies of right-wing populist parties (Wodak, 2015). The first topos/argumentation strategy is that of threat and the second is that of the savior, which assumes that “a person who has saved us in the past will be able to do so again.” The two strategies are complementary in as much as the topos of threat requires a savior. The argumentations evoke the image of the powerful Turkish leader who acts as the protector of Arab countries’ interests in the world – the iconic savior figure. However, the threat is a very real one, one that calls for a flesh-and-blood savior:

Nowadays, in the world of Islam, events that emerge in a particular area shed light on other events that have taken place elsewhere in the region. For example, immediately following the events in Gezi, which had started with a view to defending trees and then evolved into a small uprising before turning into demonstrations outside the Prime Minister’s residence and offices, another movement, Temerrüt7, emerged in Egypt when the first elected president of Egypt was overthrown. It has been said that this coup was the result of an intervention by the heroic Egyptian army, in response to the intensive demands of the people. So the army could do nothing and it was the request of the people. Okay, here, the Egyptian Army is only a kind of yes-man who follows the orders of the people! (Aktay, *Yenişafak*, July 27, 2013)

This conspiracy theory regarding political conflicts in the region also has an economic dimension. The idea of economic threat takes its most concrete form in the conspiracy theory of columnist Yiğit Bulut and his idea of a “lobby of interest,” an idea that has opened the door for him as an “economic advisor” to Erdoğan. He even suggested that the lobby planned to kill Erdoğan using methods that employed telekinesis (Gibbons, *The Guardian*, July 13, 2013). According to the pro-government col-

umnists, who regarded the Gezi protests as a coup attempt, the extent of the economic attack was limited to not only Turkey’s national investments, but was also aimed at its international treaties:

*We made a 49-year deal with Barzani. At the same time, the peace process with the Kurds of PKK continues. They want to interrupt this process with cases like Gezi or the 17-25 December judicial coup (...) They do not want to carry out such a policy with us. Oil is an important factor at this point and natural gas also. (38-year-old woman, *Yenişafak* Columnist, interviewed on 18.09.2014, in Istanbul)*

Turkey had invested in construction projects in Egypt and Libya since 2009 (Tuğal, *ibid.*). In 2011, Erdoğan went to those Arab countries affected by the *Arab Spring*, accompanied by businessmen. In 2012, Turkey signed 27 cooperation agreements with Egypt covering various sectors of activity (Mourad, 2012). Oil deals with the leader of the Iraqi Kurdish region under Barzani had strengthened Turkey’s power in the region, as well as that of Erdoğan. Therefore in the writings of pro-government columnists, economic and strategic interests of foreign countries become tools of the argumentation/topos of threat or danger. In these columns, protesters are often described as collaborators of external forces that threaten the economy or even seem to have been “provoked” by media collaborating with external forces:

*The list of demands that delegates of Taksim Solidarity (Taksim Dayanışma) passed on to Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç revealed the main intention behind this movement. The declaration of these claims also changed the image that society had of the movement. Statements containing opposition to Kanal Istanbul, the Third Bosphorus Bridge or Third Airport projects proved that Gezi Park spokespersons did not act in the name of nature, but rather in the name of some local and foreign stakeholders. (Aktay, *Yenişafak*, June 10, 2013)*

The arguments based on economic threat not only stigmatized the protesters, but also helped the columnists of the JDP circle consolidate the views of its voters around the idea of economic development. Apparently, this logic also appeals to the topos of advantage/usefulness as defined by Wodak (2015). In fact, construction projects such as the Third Bosphorus Bridge or the Third Airport that have been heavily criticized by the Gezi protesters

have become useful tools for the pro-government media elite to foster populism based on developmentalism (Bulut & Yörük, 2017):

Big projects that will make Turkey a big player not only at a regional but also at global scale do not stop being the target. The most important of these projects is undoubtedly the Third Airport, to be built in Istanbul... In this sense, opposition to the positive decision over the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) is the continuation of the Gezi events and the 'December 17 Operation' organized for the same purpose... because, when the Third Airport will be completed, it will also be the third largest airport in the world. Job opportunities will be provided for 220 thousand people. (Kahveci, Türkiye, February 12, 2014)

Nearly seven years after the Gezi protests only the Kanal Istanbul remains to be built from among these mega projects and has triggered a public debate suffused with the same developmentalist discourse and the topos/argument of usefulness/advantage. The Gezi protests have become once again a tool for the pro-government columnists, one that has given them the opportunity to accuse the Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu (from the main opposition party, the CHP-Republican People's Party) of opposing the project and thus the economic interests of the country:

Ekrem İmamoğlu gave up on Istanbul's problems, whatever his pre-election promises. He is ready to accomplish the plans of the global powers in Turkey. What are these plans? All of the issues sit on the main axis of the 2013 Gezi attempt: stopping the Third Bridge construction; stopping the airport construction; and abandoning the Kanal Istanbul project (...) Remember those days! They failed to prevent these two vital projects. But they think when they get the opportunity they can make the necessary intervention for Kanal Istanbul. This also explains what the mayor's visit to Germany and England meant for Istanbul, which was primarily awaiting service, at a time when "No ground-breaking ceremonies" 8 had been held. England, which imposed the blockage of the Kanal Istanbul project as a condition for the Gezi supporters in 2013, continues its operations through Ekrem İmamoğlu. (Dede, Star, December 11, 2019)

In these writings, the fact that these huge investments, which are located in the northern woods of

Istanbul, will destroy the natural environment is studiously concealed by arguments of "service to the people" and the economic interests of the country. Thus the JDP can appear to be serving both the people and pro-JDP businessmen such as Kolin-Cengiz-Limak-Kalyon, who secured the tender for the construction of the Third Airport (Baloğlu, 2019). Almost four years after the Gezi protests, the Gezi case was reopened with the indictment of many civil society activists, lawyers, and actors including the prominent Turkish businessman, Osman Kavala, who was arrested in 2017 on accusations of financing the Gezi protests. Long before his arrest, in the writings of a number of pro-government columnists, Kavala was depicted as "Red Soros" (Öztürk, *Yenişafak*, 31 May 2016) and his previous business activities in relation to the F-16 missile protection system revisited in order to underline his links with Western countries (Kaplan, *Daily Sabah*, 5 September 2015). Following Victor Orban's demonizing of George Soros by describing him as an *insider enemy*, Erdoğan called Kavala a local Soros (Daragahi, 2018). In February 2020, nearly two years after his arrest, the court acquitted him and other defendants who were on trial due to the absence of sufficient concrete evidence. Two days later Kavala was arrested again, this time on accusations relating to the July 2016 abortive coup (*Bianet*, 20 Feb. 2020). It is possible to argue that the techniques employed to demonize famous figures from the economic and cultural elite while personalizing the figure of the enemy within recall those used by other populist leaders or governments. As Wodak (2015) underlines, all right-wing populist actors instrumentalize "some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority as a scapegoat for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as dangerous and a threat "to us," to "our" nation. This phenomenon manifests "itself as a politics of fear."

"WE" AND "OTHERS"

In the new political discourse that emerged in the wake of the Gezi protests, secular Turks were not only criticized for monopolizing power and privilege, but also defined as "White Turks"; missionaries of a foreign culture that had colonized the authentic Muslim-Turkish nation (Arat-Koç, 2018). In political speeches, "the nation" has been declared to encompass religious Muslims and more specifically those who voted for the JDP (ibid). During the protests, the description of protesters as radicals, "White Turks," spoiled bourgeois or marginal elements was very common in Islamic publications (Avcı, 2014; Temiz, 2013).

A report on the protesters prepared by one of Erdoğan's advisors (affiliated with the pro-gov-

ernment association SETA) in conjunction with a columnist, exposed how the government attempted to portray the protesters as violent by stressing the presence of radical groups among them (Ete & Taştan, 2013, p.118). This report, as well as other reports of the association are considered an objective and reliable source of information by pro-government interviewees. Moreover, the authors frequently underline the historical power struggle between the Westernist minority elite represented by RPP and the conservative majority. In the conservative pro-government press, this opposition between conservative elements and a Westernist elite was seen as the principal argument for the stigmatization of the protesters:

There are factions in Turkey that decided it is far better to be Westerner... The indigenous Westerners in Turkey consider their own country's people as Eastern. When this disdain meets the suspicions of Western countries, these indigenous Westerners cannot see the situation either in Syria, nor in Egypt and in Israel. (...) Turkey for Westerners like you is just like other Eastern countries, one ripe for a coup. (Barlas, Sabah, July, 22, 2013)

Throughout his speeches, Erdoğan constantly claimed that the protesters had been drunk and had dirtied the park. He announced that girls and boys were sleeping together, which ran counter to the general views of the majority. Two issues in particular proved to be effective in exacerbating the tension between the two social groups (Arat-Koç, *ibid*): the first was the case of Kabataş, and the second that of the mosque in Dolmabahçe.

On June 7, 2013 during a party meeting, Erdoğan said, “they dragged the daughter-in-law of a dear friend on the ground.” A few days after this declaration, the Bahçelievler mayor’s daughter-in-law, Zehra Develioğlu, claimed in an interview for the *Star* newspaper that she had been harassed in Kabataş. According to her testimony, the protesters shouted that they would execute Erdoğan and that they had urinated on her. In February 2014, the video surveillance tape recorded on the day of the event was broadcast by television channels and on the Internet. However, no images corroborated the testimony of Develioğlu. In February 2015, the judicial investigation ended with the decision to close the case due to a lack of evidence. The Kabataş case was one of the main contributing elements to the stigmatization of the protesters of Gezi and to the polarization of religious and secular elements within society (Özen, 2015). Although

that particular case may have been fictional, in specific secular neighborhood, some protesters had insulted women with headscarves, and this had a major impact on the religious columnists’ discourse as one of the interviewees emphasized it:

After the Gezi process, I began to think that the people of the JDP were the ones who worked so that devout people like me and the Kurds could live in ideal conditions. (...) Before Gezi, I used to write more critical things towards AKP or Erdoğan but I don't write in the same way anymore. Frankly now I no longer think of criticizing it. (38 year-old woman, *Yenişafak* Columnist, interviewed in 18.09.2014, in Istanbul)

The case was a central feature of their columns for quite some time:

Should Zehra Develioğlu be dead to be taken seriously? Women with headscarves have only begun to feel like real citizens in the last five years. (...) In addition, before the JDP came to power, the experience of most religious women in public spaces was limited by the conventional customs in their neighborhoods. These women, who are liberated from secular pressures as well as discriminatory practices in their own entourage thanks to Erdoğan's policies, will not applaud the slogans saying “Resign Tayyip! (Erdoğan)” (Karaca, *Habertürk*, July 21, 2013)

The memorandum of February 28, 1997 which contained many restrictions in relation to daily religious observances also prohibited the wearing of headscarves in public institutions, such as colleges. This was regarded as a foundational political (Percheron, 1982) event, one that characterized a political generation. This was particularly so for the women columnists interviewed, who had suffered oppression during their college years because they chose to wear headscarves. Many now contended that they were emotionally and ideologically bound to the JDP and, in particular, to its leader “who gave them their rights.” They viewed this link as transcending any professional benefits they might gain from supporting Erdoğan. Another factor beyond their ideological link with the government influenced them to cover the protests with a government bias: their information sources were notably limited. For instance, only 2 out of 11 Islamist-conservative columnists generally follow international news; only 3 of them have any knowledge of English. Certainly, knowledge of a foreign language is not a prerequisite for being critical, but most of them (8 out of 11) did cite government sources as the most reliable, and those to which they referred during the Gezi protests. With

their dependence on government information sources as well as the emotional impact created by the memory of a foundational political event, it is possible to qualify them as manipulated manipulators (*manipulateurs manipulés*) (Charaudeau, *ibid*):

At that time, I was abroad and phoned friends—I mean journalist friends and family who were here—several times. I have heard too many stories of women being accosted. I did not see these things with my own eyes because I was not here. However, I have no difficulty believing them. I am someone who has been accosted several times in the street just because I wear the headscarf even if there is no atmosphere of polarization or conflict. In fact, I cannot say that during the Gezi protests there were no such acts. Something happened... I'm sure something happened. (Woman, 41-year-old, interviewed on March 13, 2015)

This kind of false news functions like rumors that serve to create social cohesion inside social groups when there is a conflict between them (Elias, 1997). Similarly, Erdoğan could be said to have benefited from the Kabataş case by creating social cohesion inside his electoral base.

The second case, that of the mosque (Bezmi Alem Valide Çeşme) in the Dolmabahçe neighborhood, had a similar influence on the religious element of society. On June 6, 2013, protesters gathered in Beşiktaş, where the prime minister's office is located, and fought with police. Those who managed to escape the police sheltered in the mosque, where volunteer doctors treated the wounded. Once again, in the speech he gave in Kazlıçeşme on June 16, 2013, Erdoğan accused the demonstrators of having acted irreverently, stating that they had entered the mosque without removing their shoes and had also carried cans of beer with them. Even years after the Gezi protests, pro-government columnists are able to find different ways to depict the protesters as Westernists and putschists:

That mosque was used as a base before the invasion attempt of Dolmabahçe (prime minister's office). I have no doubt about it. Maybe some did take refuge in the mosque as a result of the police intervention, but that night the mosque was mostly used as a base. The most striking image in the mosque was the big cross mark on the back of some people's clothes. These garments were certainly not the clothing of first-aid teams. And it certainly was not the 'healthcare' symbol on those clothes. It was the "Cru-

sader" sign, you know. (Öztürk, Yenişafak, February 21, 2020)

The imam of the mosque however, rejected the PM's claims in relation to these two points. Thanks to the imam's statements, the case of the Dolmabahçe mosque was not as polarizing as the Kabataş case.

The JDP political and media elite used both cases to promote a populist language based on the distinction between the "we" of religious people, and the faithless and Westernist "others." Victimization of one part of society is one of the main elements of this discourse. As Charaudeau points out, the deterioration in the economic situation or the images of moral decadence and the victimization of citizens in times of crisis are the main elements of such a populist discourse (Charaudeau, *ibid.*). Since 9 out of 10 of the most-read newspapers are owned by people affiliated with the government (MOM-RSF, 2019), the effectiveness of the populist discourse that has been on the rise since the Gezi protests is still obvious despite the presence of critical online news platforms and their journalists.

CONCLUSION

The JDP implemented different populist policies in line with the political and economic context of different eras since it came to power in 2002. However, the populist discourse they have adopted since the Gezi protests consists of new elements. The removal of other political leaders from the political scene and the media construction of the then PM Erdoğan as the sole savior of the "nation" by the pro-government media elite resulted in the personalization of his leadership and associated political power.

The leadership of Erdoğan in the Middle East as the president of a nascent "Turkish model" state was a story in high demand during the Arab Uprisings both in the national and international media, as at that time he hadn't yet adopted the fractious persona that would later often characterize his relationship with Western leaders. Erdoğan started to use an offensive discourse against Western leaders following the Gezi Park protests. This enabled pro-government columnists to construct the image of a "savior," a powerful leader who could protect the "nation" from the West and their local allies, the Westernist elite, who were attempting to overthrow the government. Journalists, intellectuals and celebrities who supported the protests were demonized by Erdoğan and pro-government columnists, who accused them in newspaper columns

of being a foreign power attacking Turkey's growing economy and international trade. This discourse, which arose during the Gezi protests, consists of topos/strategies of argumentation typically adopted by right-wing populist leaders and parties including the topos of savior and the topos of threat or danger.

The rise in the polarization of the secular and religious sections of society was another powerful

element that forged this new populist discourse. Consequently, since the protests, left-wing and secular journalists, scholars and intellectuals have become a common target for the ruling party that realized that this polarizing discourse would allow it to consolidate its power and electoral base.

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NOTES

¹The profile and the workplace of the columnists at the time of interview: five Kemalists (Cumhuriyet, Sözcü and Hürriyet newspapers), eleven Islamist-conservative (Yenişafak, Sabah, Karar and Zaman newspapers); twelve socialists (Birgün, ÖzgürGündem, Taraf newspapers and freelancers); nine liberal-left (Milliyet, Radikal, Cumhuriyet newspapers and freelancers); and three liberal-right columnists (Habertürk, Türkiye, Bugün newspapers)

²The Egyptian coup of July 3, 2013 and the arrest of President Mohamed Morsi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, following the large anti-Morsi protests of June 2013. The pro-JDP columnists who enjoyed a sectarian rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood cover the coup d'état as part of a conspiracy to reshape the countries of the Middle East ruled by Muslim leaders. So the Gezi protests of June 2013 were part of this conspiracy according to the government and the pro-government media.

³At the heart of the scandal was an alleged "gas for gold" arrangement with Iran involving Süleyman Aslan, the director of state-owned Halkbank and Reza Zarrab, an Iranian businessman. On December 17th, prosecutors accused people, including the two men—both sons of cabinet ministers—of money laundering and gold smuggling. The then prime minister, Tayyip Erdoğan's sons were also caught up in the scandal. Erdoğan responded to these allegations by describing them as a conspiracy against his government organized by the Hizmet movement of Turkish cleric Gülen. Following the revelations of the investigations, he purged a number of official bodies, including those of the police, judges and prosecutors in January 2014 as part of an "anti-corruption operation." Erdoğan's government and pro-government media proclaimed these events to be a continuation of the Gezi protests and part of a wider coup attempt.

⁴Some columnists quoted in this article (e.g. Ocaktan, Akşam, December 13, 2013; Karaca, Habertürk, July 21, 2013) changed their stance vis-à-vis the JDP government—but not necessarily vis-à-vis the Gezi protests—after the resignation of then PM Davutoğlu in 2015 or following the 2016 coup attempt. However, they were among the influential media elite, with thousands of followers on social media or part of the pro-government media during the Gezi protests, and in the ensuing process had contributed to the populist discourse, which is the subject of this article.

⁵Because the abbreviation of Justice and Development in Turkish is AK (which also means White-Pure), founders and supporters call it the AK Parti, that is, the White-Pure Party. So pro-government trolls were quickly labelled AKTrolls by opponents on Twitter following the 2013 Gezi Park protests.

⁶The columnist refers to the "Flower Children" gathered in San Francisco, in the United States in 1967 during the Summer of Love event, which promoted free love and adopted an anti-war stance, one that was principally opposed to the Vietnam War.

⁷Tamarod, which means "revolt" in Arab was a grassroots movement that was behind the June 2013 nationwide protests in Egypt that occurred just before the July coup and Morsi's arrest.

⁸Imamoğlu rejected the tender for a treatment facility project initiated by the previous mayor in the Silahtarğa neighbourhood, in an area that covers 75.000 m² of woodland, and which would have cost almost 240 million dollars (1525 billion Turkish liras in 2020) (İBB, 7 November 2019).

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The Authoritarian Shift of Populist Discourse in Turkey

Le virage autoritaire du discours populiste en Turquie

A Mudança Autoritária do Discurso Populista na Turquia

En Although the terms “populist,” “populism” and even “people” are deeply ambiguous for theorists working on different aspects of populism in various countries, they have reached a consensus with respect to certain characteristics of populism and its incipient drivers: its emergence following a political or economic crisis (Moffit, *ibid.*), the presence of a charismatic leader (Taguieff, 2007), etc. The populism of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in Turkey and its leader can be seen to vary from one era to the other, however. A crisis, triggered by the Gezi Protests in 2013, resulted in the existing populist discourse becoming more personalized, with some scholars calling it Erdoğanism (Bora, 2017). With the support of conservative and right-wing columnists, who framed the protests as a plot against Turkey and its democratically elected leader, Erdoğan realized that it would be possible to benefit from the crisis. This article discusses the role played by pro-government columnists during the Gezi protests and attempts to shed light on the emergence of a new populist discourse. It focuses on columns and in-depth interviews of Islamist-conservative or right-wing columnists (14 of 40 columnists interviewed) and relies on discourse analysis theories that underlie the characteristics of populist discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Charaudeau, 2011; Wodak, 2015). The study reveals that the personalization of political power, the argumentation of an economic threat and the demonization of the social groups that joined the protests are the three main elements of the new populist discourse.

Keywords: The Gezi Protests, populist discourse, the JDP (Justice and Development Party), Erdoğanism, columnists

Fr. Bien que les termes « populiste » « populisme » ou même « peuple » soient profondément ambigus pour les théoriciens travaillant sur différents aspects du populisme dans différents pays, ils sont parvenus à un consensus sur certaines caractéristiques du populisme et des motifs qui l'incitent: son émergence suite à une crise politique ou économique (Moffit, *ibid.*); la présence d'un leader charismatique (Taguieff, 2007), etc. Toutefois, le populisme du JDP et de son leader peut varier d'une époque à l'autre. Une crise, déclenchée par les manifestations de Gezi en Turquie en 2013, a entraîné une personnalisation du discours populiste existant, certains universitaires l'appelant l'Erdoğanisme (Bora, 2017). Avec le soutien des éditorialistes conservateurs et de droite, qui ont décrit les manifestations comme un complot contre la Turquie et son dirigeant démocratiquement élu, Erdoğan s'est rendu compte qu'il serait possible de profiter de la crise. Cet article discute du rôle joué par les éditorialistes progouvernementaux lors des manifestations de Gezi et tente de clarifier les motifs de l'émergence d'un nouveau discours populiste. Il se concentre sur les éditoriaux et les entretiens approfondis des éditorialistes islamistes-conservateurs ou de droite (14 des 40 chroniqueurs interrogés) et s'appuie sur des théories d'analyse du discours qui sous-tendent les caractéristiques du discours populiste (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Charaudeau, 2011; Wodak, 2015) L'étude révèle que la personnalisation du pouvoir politique, l'argumentation de la menace économique et la stigmatisation des groupes sociaux qui ont rejoint les manifestations sont les trois principaux éléments du nouveau discours populiste.

Mot-Clés: Les manifestations de Gezi-Le, discours populiste, le PJD (Le parti de Justice et de Développement), Erdoğanisme-Editorialistes

Pt. Embora os termos “populista”, “populismo” e até mesmo “pessoas” sejam profundamente ambíguos para os teóricos que trabalham em diferentes aspectos do populismo em vários países, eles chegaram a um consenso com relação a certas características do populismo e dos padrões que o incitam: seu surgimento após uma crise política ou econômica (Moffit, *ibid.*), a presença de um líder carismático (Taguieff, 2007) etc. No entanto, o populismo do Partido da Justiça e Desenvolvimento (JDP) na Turquia e de seu líder pode variar de uma época para outra. Uma crise, desencadeada pelos protestos de Gezi em 2013, resultou na personalização do discurso populista existente, com alguns estudiosos chamando-o de erdoganismo (Bora, 2017). Com o apoio de colunistas conservadores e de direita, que enquadraram os protestos como uma conspiração contra a Turquia e seu líder democraticamente eleito, Erdoğan percebeu que seria possível se beneficiar da crise. Este artigo discute o papel desempenhado pelos colunistas pró-governo durante os protestos de Gezi e tenta lançar luz sobre o surgimento de um novo discurso populista. Ele se concentra em colunas e entrevistas em profundidade de colunistas islâmicos-conservadores ou de direita (14 de 40 colunistas entrevistados) e se baseia em teorias de análise de discurso subjacentes às características do discurso populista (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Charaudeau, 2011; Wodak 2015). O estudo revela que a personalização do poder político, a argumentação de uma ameaça econômica e a demonização dos grupos sociais que aderiram aos protestos são os três principais elementos do novo discurso populista.

Palavras-chave: Protestos de Gezi, discurso populista, JDP (Partido da Justiça e Desenvolvimento), Erdoganismo, colunistas

