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# Foreign Policy Making in the Age of Populism: The Uses of Anti-Westernism in Turkish Politics

Oğuzhan Göksel\*

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## Abstract

Many foreign policy analysts portray leaders as “chief negotiators” responsible for delicately sustaining a balancing act between the interests of their domestic constituents and the wishes of extra-national actors (e.g. other governments, international organisations, multinational companies). This depiction may accurately explain the behaviour of decision-makers in liberal democratic societies, but foreign policy making function differently in illiberal populist polities. This article argues that contemporary Turkey constitutes an illiberal populist regime where foreign policy making is subjugated to domestic policy concerns, and an assertive anti-Western foreign policy rhetoric is often systematically employed to generate public support to the incumbent AKP (Justice and Development Party) administration. Using the AKP’s 2017 Constitutional Referendum campaign as a case study, I suggest that anti-Westernism is an effective discourse to garner domestic support under illiberal populism.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy Analysis; Two-Level Games; Innenpolitik Approach; Illiberal Populism; Anti-Westernism; Turkish Foreign Policy; Turkey; Germany; The Netherlands

## Introduction

The link between foreign policy decision-making and domestic politics has long attracted attention within the scholarly literature,<sup>1</sup> most notably conceptualised as “two-level games” by Robert D. Putnam (1988). The research subject is truly complex and it can only be genuinely grasped with a multi-dimensional approach based on insights offered by various interrelated fields such as foreign policy analysis, comparative politics and political economy.

Many scholars such as Putnam portray leaders as “chief negotiators” responsible for delicately sustaining a balancing act between the interests of their domestic constituents and the wishes of extra-national actors (e.g. other governments, international organisations, multinational companies) (da Conceição-Heldt and Mello 2017: 3). This depiction may accurately explain the role of decision-makers in liberal democratic societies because leaders in such contexts tend to stay in power for a relatively short time (usually less than 10 years) and their limited tenure means that their rule generally comes to an end before they are able to establish a large degree of autonomy from extra-national actors. However, this study contends that the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy making function differently in illiberal populist polities such as contemporary Turkey, Hungary, Russia and

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Venezuela where governments feel less bound by the pressures of extra-national actors (Brummer and Hudson 2015; Warnaar 2013; Legvold 2007).

Unlike leaders in liberal democratic countries, decision-makers in illiberal polities tend to seek unquestioning loyalty from their constituents via populist actions and these are often crucial components of their political survival strategies (Müller 2016: 3-11). Foreign policy making of illiberal leaders can often be very assertive, and even aggressive, because hawkish foreign policy actions can be effectively utilised as a populist discursive device to distract constituents from domestic problems (e.g. income inequality or unemployment) while simultaneously enabling leaders to use extra-national actors as “useful scape-goats” in this regard. Thus, it is perhaps not a coincidence that *anti-Westernism* has been a shared characteristic of the foreign policies of many illiberal populist leaders across the world such as Vladimir Putin and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

This article argues that contemporary Turkey also constitutes a country where foreign policy making is subjugated to domestic policy concerns, and an assertive anti-Western foreign policy rhetoric is often systematically employed to generate public support to the incumbent AKP (Justice and Development Party) administration. This attitude becomes most apparent during key domestic conjunctures such as the run-up to the 16 April 2017 Constitutional Referendum in which a super-presidential executive system was put to the vote. Using the AKP’s recent referendum campaign – a period of a few months characterised by an intense anti-Western stance as witnessed during the major diplomatic crises between Ankara and European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany – as a case study, I suggest that anti-Westernism is an effective discourse to garner domestic support in illiberal populist contexts. Examining the results of various public opinion polls, I conclude that anti-Western foreign policy behaviour influenced the electoral behaviour of the citizenry (particularly that of the Turkish diaspora in Europe) and ultimately contributed to the approval of the super-presidential system in Turkey.

The first section of the article reviews the theoretical literature on the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy making. While the explanatory power of Putnam’s (and like-minded scholars’) “two-level games” perspective is acknowledged, it is argued that a slightly different understanding is needed to comprehend the foreign policy making of illiberal populist regimes. In the following second section, contemporary Turkey under the AKP administration is defined as a typical illiberal populist regime and the ongoing consolidation of such a socio-political order is examined. The third section constitutes the main case study of the article, namely the analysis of the AKP’s anti-Western foreign policy in conjunction with major domestic developments leading to the 2017 Constitutional Referendum. Finally I briefly comment on the potential trajectories of Turkish politics and foreign policy in the near future, concluding the article with a discussion on the theoretical insights derived from the case of Turkey for the broader literature.

### **Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Making**

The influence of domestic politics over foreign policy making has received a lot attention by scholars of International Relations (IR) and there is a growing literature on various aspects of this issue.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless Valerie M. Hudson (2014: 142), Samuel Robison (2011: 189-195)

and Christopher Hill (2016: 228-231) note that not many have been willing to develop comprehensive generalizable theories about the multifaceted interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy making. In this context, there are several notable exceptions: the “democratic peace theory” that Michael Doyle (2012) derived from the ideas of Immanuel Kant, the “two-level games” concept of Putnam (1988) and the so-called “*Innenpolitik* (domestic policy) approach” of scholars such as Thomas Risse-Kappen (1991).

The democratic peace theory puts forward the well-known portrayal of liberal democracy as an *intrinsically more peaceful* regime type than less-democratic polities such as authoritarianism, totalitarianism and mixed/hybrid regimes (Doyle 2012). This argument is based on the assumption that liberal democratic governments have to be more receptive to public opinion. After all, a citizenry suffering the painful consequences of a war may simply choose to replace the incumbent government in the next free and fair election. Moreover, this theory suggests that democracy – even though it is undeniable that the concept is understood in radically different ways across the world and is also subject to manipulation by various actors – has become a universally accepted value in our time and that warlike less-democratic regimes would face potentially irresistible pressures from powerful democratic regimes for democratic reform (Alden and Aran 2017: 109). Thus, the democratic peace theory emphasises the constraints imposed by the domestic context for liberal democratic regimes while it also notes the limiting role of international context for the foreign policy making of less-democratic regimes.

Not unlike Doyle, Putnam presupposes a strong connection between domestic politics and foreign policy as he likens this relationship to a leader playing chess on two boards at the same time. The two boards represent separate realms of domestic politics and international politics, and movements in one board inevitably reflect on the other (Putnam 1988: 433-435; da Conceição-Heldt and Mello 2017). For instance, a major foreign policy fiasco may trigger a chain reaction culminating in the emergence of a strong domestic opposition which could ultimately remove a government from power.

Though Doyle and Putnam focus on different dimensions of the issue, they both highlight the strong linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy making. In fact, as can also be seen in the passage below, there is a consensus among scholars (Breuning 2007; Evans 2009; Robison 2011; Hill 2016; Brummer and Hudson 2015) that foreign policy making is essentially an extremely complex process involving various national and international actors (and of course their interests):

Foreign policies are in most cases designed through coalitions of domestic and international actors and groups. When analyzing the head of government or in other words the executor of foreign policies, many motivating factors can be identified to explain the rationale behind decisions taken. Some factors of influence include the leader’s own personality and cognition, degree of rationality, domestic politics and international and domestic interest groups (Hussain 2011).

As such, foreign policy making of governments – whether liberal democratic or not – is depicted as a balancing act that has to give equal or near-equal attention to the demands of national and international actors (da Conceição-Heldt and Mello 2017: 12-13). Even the most powerful governments of the globe (e.g. Washington, Moscow and Beijing) are not

commonly expected to possess the ability to unilaterally shape their foreign policies – without taking into consideration the potential reactions of other governments and/or international organisations. Despite the general agreement over this assessment in the scholarly literature, however, the *Innenpolitik* approach offers an alternative understanding of the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy making (Robison 2011: 193).

Risse-Kappen (1991) argues that the *primacy* of domestic context (i.e. regime type, national culture, economy, electoral politics etc.) in ultimately determining the course of action of a government is – to some extent – overlooked in the above literature (Evans 2009; Robison 2011: 193-194). Accordingly, international context can almost never be as influential as domestic factors in terms of foreign policy making. A government has to derive its legitimacy and the very rationale of its existence from its own citizenry. A government that successfully obtains the willing consent or forced submission of its people may survive for a long time even if it is isolated by super-powers and/or large section of the international community. In this context, several durable regimes that thrive, or at least survive, despite the isolation for many decades by the US and its allies can be evaluated as cases in point: North Korea (isolated since the Korean War ended in 1953), Cuba (isolated since the 1959 Revolution), and Iran (isolated since the 1979 Islamic Revolution).

While the aforementioned democratic peace theory and two-level games concept are generally effective in explaining the foreign policy making of liberal democratic regimes, the *Innenpolitik* approach is especially suitable to understand the relatively higher autonomy of less-democratic polities from the international context. Most foreign policy analysts study liberal democratic Western societies (e.g. the US and the European Union countries) that generally resemble each other in terms of executive and legislative processes; therefore many do not feel the need to discuss the way in which different political regimes reflect on foreign policy making.<sup>3</sup> However, among all the domestic drivers of foreign policy making, *the nature of the political regime* is of utmost importance as it either limits or expands a government's autonomy vis-à-vis extra-national actors (Hill 2016: 244-245; Hussain 2011).

Thomas Risse-Kappen (1991: 479-483) suggests that the reason why “similarly powerful states often respond differently to the same international conditions” is that some political regimes are more elitist than others. The more elitist a regime is, the more it is likely to devise a foreign policy that does not reflect the expectations of other governments and the broader international community. In genuine liberal democratic regimes of our time (e.g. the US, the UK, France and Germany), governments tend to feel immense pressures from the international community as well as their domestic public opinion while making foreign policy decisions (Doyle 2012; Breuning 2007). In less-democratic contexts, however, governments tend not to feel the same amount of pressures due to numerous reasons. For instance, the absence of free media in less-democratic regimes means that neither the domestic public nor extra-national actors have any reliable sources of alternative information. As such, both are solely dependent on government propaganda or social media, neither of which can possibly be considered as reliable sources of information. Besides, most less-democratic regimes do not hold meaningful elections that could possibly endanger an incumbent leader's tenure. Thus, the ability of extra-national actors to effectively pressure a less-democratic regime via economic and/or diplomatic sanctions is severely limited – compared to the impact of such influences over a liberal democratic government (Hill 2016: 247-248). For instance, even

though the US-imposed trade sanctions have weakened the economy of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the early 1980s,<sup>4</sup> the authoritarian Tehran regime has not faced any major risks to its hegemony and suppressed domestic opposition groups without much difficulty (e.g. the Green Movement protests in 2009-2010).

In order to ascertain whether a regime can act more or less autonomously from international constraints, Risse-Kappen (1991: 486) advises us to ask the following crucial questions:

- “Is executive power concentrated in the hands of one decision maker (president, prime minister, chancellor) who controls the bureaucratic infighting among governmental agencies?”
- “To what extent can the government (single-handedly) control the legislative process?”

If an exceptionally strong leader – who generally happens to possess a country-wide cult of charismatic personality – is in control of the executive and legislative processes, then foreign policy making tends to be largely unilateral. Furthermore, Risse-Kappen (1991: 486) contends that “in countries with centralized political institutions but polarized societies and rather weak social organizations, the policy network is likely to be state-dominated. The policy-relevant coalition building would then be restricted to the political elites and would more or less exclude societal actors and/or public opinion”. The above analysis presented by the *Innenpolitik* approach clearly explains the way in which foreign policy mechanism operates in less-democratic regimes. Thus I have chosen to apply this approach to the case of Turkish foreign policy rather than its counterparts such as Putnam’s two-level games. Contemporary Turkey under the AKP rule constitutes an illiberal populist regime which is generally evaluated as a “less-democratic” or “semi-democratic” political order (Boyle 2016; Illing 2017). The following sub-section of the article defines the concept of *illiberal populism* and explains its impact on foreign policy decision-making.

### **Foreign Policy Making Process in the Age of Illiberal Populism**

*Illiberal populist* movements and “strongman” leaders have meteorically risen to power in recent years across the world – a development that seems to have shocked many observers and scholars of IR (Boyle 2016; Illing 2017; Müller 2016; Rodrik 2018; Tharoor 2018; Diamond 2017; Mueller 2017). Michael J. Boyle (2016: 35-36) terms this ongoing global phenomenon “the Age of Illiberal Order” as leaders such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán even publicly declare liberal democracy “dead” and present authoritarianism as a more successful model of governance and economic development. Recent reports of Freedom House (2017, 2018) warn us of a “global authoritarian resurgence” which not only affect newly-industrialising countries but also Western ones such as the US – especially after Donald Trump came to power – and France which has witnessed to the rise of right-wing extremist Marine Le Pen’s FN (National Front) party. The 2018 report of Freedom House is pessimistically entitled “Democracy in Crisis”.

The reign of illiberal populism may have just begun, but the origins of the current scholarly debate can be traced to an influential article Fareed Zakaria (1997) wrote more than two decades ago. The most thought-provoking and controversial aspect of Zakaria's work is the idea that there is a *commonly overlooked major difference* between democracy and liberalism. Accordingly, democracy is merely a method for electing leaders by popular participation whereas liberalism refers to the sum of all principles and practices that define the nature of a political regime (Illing 2017; Zakaria 1997). Ideally, a liberal democracy not only holds regular free and fair elections but it also protects individual rights against any and all threats. If the whims of a popular elected leader threaten the civic rights of a minority group, the regime should protect that minority – even if this means that the majority of the populace cannot obtain what they want.

Zakaria (1997) implies that there are various types of democracies, and that some of them could be *illiberal*. The contradiction of this understanding is that once a democratic regime begins to slide towards illiberalism via regularly violating human rights and other crucial principles of liberal order, what can stop the incumbent leader(s) from also dismantling democracy itself? If a democratically elected government gradually dominates the entire state bureaucracy – just as Risse-Kappen (1991) describes above – to the point of building a party-state, monopolises the media via systematically eliminating the political opposition's mass media, and severely constraints the freedom of expression by imprisoning critics, then it becomes impossible to hold free and fair elections. So even if an illiberal polity emerges out of democratic elections at first, it cannot remain democratic for too long.

The ongoing rise of illiberal populism in countries such as Hungary, India, Turkey, and Russia in recent years has shown that Zakaria's concept of "illiberal democracy" is a misnomer. The incumbent governments in these countries came to power via democratic elections, yet have tried to consolidate their hegemony by regularly violating liberal principles (Diamond 2017; Boyle 2016; Titov 2018; Göksel 2018a; Tamkin 2018; Mueller 2017; Tharoor 2018; Chambers 2017; Müller 2016). For instance, Russia – arguably the most authoritarian illiberal regime among them – under President Vladimir Putin continues to hold regular elections, but it is highly doubtful if these are truly free of electoral fraud (Titov 2018; Meyer 2018). If we were to draw a spectrum measuring degrees of democratisation, the aforementioned illiberal populist polities could be positioned closer to fully authoritarian regimes than to liberal democracy. As such, illiberal populism provides a *façade democracy* at best, devoid of most of the practices that constitute a liberal democracy (e.g. functioning rule of law, protected minority rights, fair competition for power, free media and civil society). It is important to note that despite notable similarities, there are also major differences among de facto members of the emergent "global illiberal populist club". Contemporary Turkey and Hungary, for instance, are clearly more democratic than Putin's Russia as they hold regular – and to some extent, *free* – elections that could conceivably change the incumbent administrations even if the voices of political opposition can hardly be heard in mainstream media outlets.

At the heart of illiberal populism lies the belief that democratic institutions and liberal principles and practices are *unnecessarily complex barriers* preventing the "authentic people" (defined solely as the majority in a given country) from imposing their will on their own political system (Müller 2016: 3). A common trait of charismatic illiberal populist

demagogues is to depict these institutions and principles as “mechanisms of foreign control” and/or as “devices of minority groups” (Chambers 2017). The logic of illiberal populism is essentially incompatible with rules of democratic competition, because politics is seen as a zero sum game in which the winner of the election should be free to rule the country without any opposition/challenge from other groups. The state is perceived as a “property” that should be, by force if necessary, recovered from the so-called “enemies of the people” (Müller 2016: 42). As such, there is no room for compromise with political groups that offer alternative visions for the country. An acute xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment and the regular scapegoating of ethnic/religious minorities are common themes within illiberal populist rhetoric (Higgott and Proud 2017: 16; Rodrik 2018; Tharoor 2018; Chambers 2017).

Unlike leaders in liberal democratic countries, decision-makers in illiberal populist polities tend to seek unquestioning loyalty from their constituents via populist actions and these are often crucial components of their political survival strategies (Müller 2016: 3-11). Foreign policy making of illiberal leaders can often be very assertive, and even aggressive, because hawkish foreign policy actions can be effectively utilised as a populist discursive device to distract constituents from domestic problems (e.g. income inequality or unemployment) while simultaneously enabling leaders to use extra-national actors as “useful scape-goats” in this regard (Boyle 2016: 37-46; Chambers 2017). Thus, it is perhaps not a coincidence that anti-Westernism has been a shared characteristic of the foreign policies of many illiberal populist leaders across the world such as Vladimir Putin and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Warnaar 2013; Legvold 2007).

Under illiberal populism, foreign policy making is regularly subjugated to domestic policy concerns and an assertive anti-Western rhetoric is often systematically employed to generate public support to incumbent administrations. Anti-Westernism is a valuable tool of illiberal populist foreign policy, because it enables such a government to appeal to an imaginary “nationalist nostalgia” (e.g. nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Russia and for the Ottoman Empire in Turkey) while simultaneously accusing an external enemy for current socio-economic and/or political troubles. For instance, a commonly voiced belief in contemporary Turkey is that the Ottoman Empire did not gradually collapse by itself and that it was destroyed from within by Western powers and ethnic/religious minorities (Taş 2014). An extension of this anti-Western way of thinking can be found in the popular AKP rhetoric about the present state of Turkish economy. According to speakers of the AKP administration and a considerable part of Turkish public, the economic slow-down in recent years and the ongoing rapid devaluation of Turkish currency cannot be attributed to mismanagement by the AKP because these economic troubles are systematically engineered by “foreign forces and their secret allies in the country”.<sup>5</sup> Before we study the case of illiberal populist Turkish foreign policy in detail, however, the following section of the article will briefly explain the emergence and consolidation of illiberal populism in the country.

### **An Overview: The Consolidation of Illiberal Populism in Turkey (2013-2019)**

When the Arab Uprisings began in 2011, Turkey was confidently presented by countless observers including distinguished scholars, various governments and even the EU as a successful model of democracy for the Middle East and North Africa region.<sup>6</sup> Over the



course of less than a decade, the discourse of Turkish democratic model has disintegrated. Perhaps the first dramatic demonstration of the illiberal populist character of the “New Turkey” occurred when the AKP administration heavy-handedly repressed the 2013 Gezi Park protests (Öncü 2013; Gürcan and Peker 2014; Göksel and Tekdemir 2018). Later the “Peace Process” between the AKP administration and the Kurdish-led HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) collapsed in the summer of 2015, followed by ever-intensifying restrictions on the freedom of expression as seen in the case of the *Academics for Peace* petition in 2016 (Baser et al. 2017; Tekdemir et al. 2018; Aksu Tanık 2018). The failure of the 15 July 2016 military coup attempt due to popular resistance in the streets could have been a very positive development for Turkish democracy. In fact, it was an unprecedented victory of the citizenry versus a military junta.<sup>7</sup> Yet the state of emergency (*Olağanüstü Hal* or simply *OHAL* in Turkish) that was declared immediately after the coup attempt has been utilised by the government to undertake hardly transparent full-scale purges within academia, bureaucracy and civil society – triggering debates over the rule of law and the fairness of the judicial process (Kars Kaynar 2018).

Arguably Turkish democracy was always a deeply flawed and problematic one (particularly in terms of minority rights and the freedom of expression; see Göksel 2015: 284-291), yet strong critiques of Turkish democracy were often met with scepticism and aroused controversy in the 2000s and early 2010s (Tuğal 2016; Göksel 2016: 258-262). Today, such criticisms are not even challenged by pro-government circles that often publicly acknowledge democratic deficits but defend these by simply arguing that “extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures” (*Star* 2018). Many now perceive Turkey as one of the pioneers of the aforementioned “global authoritarian resurgence” or as a typical representative of the “Age of Illiberal Populism” (Boyle 2016; Tharoor 2018; Illing 2018; Rodrik 2018).

The dramatic decline of Turkish democracy in recent years has been at the centre of public discussions within and beyond Turkey, leading to a burgeoning scholarly literature.<sup>8</sup> Heated debates continue over which terminology and conceptualisation most effectively explains the nature of Turkey’s emergent political regime, ranging from *delegative democracy* to *majoritarianism* and *electoral authoritarianism* (Sarfati 2017; Göksel 2018a; Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016; Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Kars Kaynar 2018; Taş 2015). Regardless of whichever typology is preferred, it is clear that the extent of Turkey’s ongoing departure from democracy since 2013 has few parallels in Republican history. In a recently published article, Evren Balta (2018) analyses the democratisation trajectory of Turkey in light of several notable data sets such as those put forward by *Freedom House* and *Polity IV*. The data sets in question seek to assess broad trends in the performance of countries over many decades and the variables they include are the most commonly cited features of liberal democracy such as rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and minority rights. In nearly all categories in several indexes, Turkey’s performance over the course of the last five years has been abysmal as it is among the fastest declining democracies in the world (Freedom House 2017, 2018; Balta 2018). As noted by Balta (2018), perhaps the only other periods in which Turkey had similar levels of authoritarian practices was the one-party rule of the Kemalist CHP (Republican People’s Party) in the early Republic years (1923-1950) and the direct military dictatorship of the early 1980s following the 12 September 1980 coup d’état. Recently, some observers of Turkish

politics have even begun to doubt if the country could possibly hold fair and transparent elections – free from government fraud (Kirişçi and Onaylı 2018; Phillips 2017; *Hurriyet Daily News* 2018).

A detailed study of the decline of Turkish democracy is beyond the scope of this article, therefore I instead preferred to direct interested readers to helpful sources in relevant parts of this section. After this very concise summary of recent political developments, the following section will examine in detail the impact of illiberal populism on Turkey's foreign policy making.

### **Turkish Foreign Policy Making on the Road to the April 2017 Referendum**

Since 2013, Turkish foreign policy has been oriented towards anti-Westernism alongside the aforementioned consolidation of an illiberal populist regime centred on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's charismatic leadership. Yet, it is important to note that the AKP administration surely did not "invent" anti-Westernism in Turkish political life, as it has a long history dating back to late Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Actually the AKP spent most of its first decade in power (2002-2011) as a predominantly pro-EU party contesting the aggressive anti-Western discourses and conspiracy theories of rivals such as the CHP, MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and the Workers' Party (later renamed "Vatan Partisi", the Homeland Party) of well-known Eurasianist Doğu Perinçek (Aydın-Düzgit 2018: 21-23; Çınar 2018: 183-186). The AKP's radical shift to an increasingly fervent form of anti-Westernism began shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests. The US and various EU governments publically criticised the AKP administration's crackdown on Gezi protesters, prompting the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to repeatedly accuse the West of "sponsoring a treasonous rebellion" (Taş 2014). At the time, Erdoğan also threatened to expel the American ambassador Francis Ricciardone who had posted news and photos about the protests to his social media profile (Taş 2014).

Numerous surveys show that conspiracy-ridden anti-Westernism has a wide appeal that cuts across established party constituencies and the entrenched ideological polarisations of Turkish society (Guida 2008; Yılmaz 2011; Aydın-Düzgit 2018):

Conspiracy theories have a long shelf life in Turkey. Such narratives, mostly drawing parallels between the imperial history of Europe and its political ambitions today, rely on an inflated self-confidence and superiority complex. The underlying assumption of these conspiracy theories is that Turkey's unbridled rise and political potency challenges and annoys the hegemonic western powers. Considering the discrepancy between political reality and national self-perception, these explanations flattering many Turks might really sell (Taş 2014).

Perhaps anti-Westernism is one the few factors that has the potential power to attract the voters of all the mainstream Turkish political currents – namely Kemalism, Turkish nationalism, conservatism and Islamism – and unite them around the authority of the central state mechanism. As such, it should be understood as an extremely potent force for generating legitimacy and public support to the AKP administration which has been isolated

within the global political system in recent years while Turkey's economic performance has also faltered within the same time period (Esen and Gumuscu 2017).

An interesting pattern of Turkish foreign policy in recent years is that it assumes an extremely flamboyant anti-Western character shortly before key turning points (e.g. parliamentary and presidential elections) concerning the preservation of the AKP hegemony. The 16 April 2017 Referendum constituted one such turning point as it was essentially the final step on the road to the consolidation of illiberal populism in the country. The referendum package proposed the most comprehensive revision of the Turkish Constitution since it first came into effect in 1982. Observers such as Sinan Ekim and Kemal Kirişçi (2017) claimed that if the proposed amendments were to pass the popular vote, "Turkey would never be the same again" and that the "dramatic changes proposed would set in motion the most drastic shake-up of the country's... system of governance in its 94-year-long history". These concerns were certainly shared by various mainstream Western media outlets such as *The Economist* as well as by opposition parties in Turkey (Rita Scotti 2017). The CHP and the HDP built their entire campaigns on the argument that the proposed package would essentially transform Turkey into "a fascist one-man dictatorship" (Esen and Gumuscu 2017: 310-313).

The main proposed changes were as follows: 1. the office of the prime minister would be abolished and all of its duties and powers would be transferred to the office of the president. Therefore, the president would become the head of government in addition to being the head of state. This amendment aimed to replace Turkey's parliamentary system with a full-presidential model such as the one in the US. Yet, the complex bicameral structure and the various checks and balances of the American presidential model would not exist in the new Turkish political system. 2. The ability of the parliament to check and balance the executive government would be significantly reduced. The parliament would no longer be able to propose enquiries regarding government ministers and top-ranking bureaucrats without the permission of the president. The president would prepare the national budget and have the right to enact laws by decree (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname*, or simply *KHK* in Turkish) when necessary. Under state of emergency, these laws by decree would be completely unchecked by supreme courts such as the Constitutional Court. 3. The president would gain greater control over the bureaucracy and judiciary by appointing an increased percentage of the top ranking members of state institutions and supreme courts.

The opposition claims of "building a fascist dictatorship" may have been an exaggeration, yet the envisaged political system is certainly an illiberal populist regime that heavily concentrates power in the hands of a single decision-maker – clearly fitting the aforementioned analysis put forward by Risse-Kappen (1991: 486). Under such a political system, President Erdoğan and the AKP administration feel very little meaningful pressure from the international context and instead completely subjugate Turkish foreign policy making to their main domestic policy agenda of consolidating the emergent political order (Göksel 2018a: 76-77). The proposed package was ultimately approved by popular vote on 16 April 2017, and it is important to analyse the crucial contribution of anti-Westernism to the referendum victory of the AKP.

In the run-up to the 16 April 2017 Referendum, numerous public opinion polls suggested that the race between "yes" and "no" campaigns was extremely close to the extent

that the outcome could even be decided by a few thousand votes (Ekim and Kirişçi 2017; Rita Scotti 2017: 258-263; Esen and Gumuscu 2017: 303-305). As the proposed amendments were written in the terminology-heavy jargon of the Turkish legal system, apparently many citizens were not sure of what to think about the package and were undecided (*BBC* 2017). In addition, intense constraints placed on the freedom of expression in Turkey made it very difficult for public opinion polls to correctly assess the situation in the field:

In an overview of 28 surveys, 12 of them predict a victory for ‘yes,’ while eight suggest the ‘no’ camp will win. There is also the question of undecided voters. Some suggest that they actually oppose the package, but are unwilling to openly say so because of the oppressive environment in Turkey today (Ekim and Kirişçi 2017).

In this unclear political atmosphere, organising demonstrations across Europe alongside those in Turkish provinces became an absolute necessity for the AKP administration. Approximately 3 million Turkish citizens living abroad were eligible to vote in the 16 April 2017 Referendum, constituting more than %5 of approximately 58 million total voters (*Sabah* 2017). Thus the Turkish diaspora could play a determining role in a neck-to-neck referendum race. The results of past elections showed that a considerable portion of the diaspora living in European countries with sizable Turkish voters (e.g. Germany and the Netherlands) were sympathetic to the AKP administration (*Sabah* 2017). Yet whenever the voter turnout remained relatively low (as seen in the case of the 7 June 2015 parliamentary election), the share of AKP votes also declined (see **Table 1** and **Table 2**). Demonstrations across European cities had effectively increased enthusiasm and contributed to the AKP’s decisive victory in the 1 November 2015 election (*BBC* 2017; see also **Table 1** and **Table 2**). If the AKP leaders could once again energise their supporters among the diaspora and manage to increase the voter turnout, they could have benefited immeasurably in the referendum.

In light of the points raised above, the AKP attempted to organise large-scale demonstrations across Western and Central Europe, most notably in Germany and the Netherlands which respectively hold the first and third largest number of Turkish voters in Europe (*Sabah* 2017). Due to a number of reasons, both the Dutch and German governments refused to allow President Erdoğan and several Turkish ministers such as Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to organise demonstrations – triggering unprecedented crises in Turkey’s relations with the Netherlands and Germany. Even before these diplomatic incidents, Turkey’s relations with the EU had been strained as various governments such as Germany, the Netherlands and Austria had issued public criticisms of the proposed referendum package which they argued was “anti-democratic” (Capone and de Guttery 2017: 62-63).

The crisis with Germany first began on 2 March 2017 after the planned public rally of then Turkish Minister of Justice, Bekir Bozdağ, in Gaggenau was cancelled by the local municipality. Some German media outlets praised this decision and presented it as “retribution” for Turkey’s previous arrest of a German journalist, namely Deniz Yücel (Özdemir 2017). Within the same week, various German state agencies and local municipalities cancelled a number of demonstrations and public speeches by AKP speakers and ministers – the most notable being the cancellation of Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu’s speech in Hamburg (Capone and de Guttery 2017: 64).

The cancellations were covered extensively by pro-government Turkish media. *A Haber* (2017), for instance, argued that the “German-led imperialist EU has never wanted Turkey as an equal ally, but instead as an emasculated dependency”. Accordingly, Turkey’s rise to regional hegemony under President Erdoğan had evoked memories of Ottoman grandeur in the minds of Western powers; therefore they have been supposedly attacking the country from within since the 2013 Gezi protests (*A Haber* 2017). The AKP leaders issued strongly-worded anti-Western statements in response to Germany’s cancellations. Çavuşoğlu said: “If you wish to cooperate with us as partners, you must learn how to behave. This cannot go on. If it does, we know very well how to retaliate... This kind of behaviour [against Turkey] has become a typical practice of the German deep state... Turkey is not a servant of the West” (Capone and de Guttry 2017: 64; Özdemir 2017). President Erdoğan also made a highly controversial speech in a demonstration and stated that “contemporary Germans are behaving exactly like their Nazi ancestors” (Özdemir 2017).

While the crisis with Germany continued in the run-up to the 2017 Referendum, a much more severe one began with the Netherlands. Following Germany’s lead, Dutch municipalities cancelled all the pre-arranged “yes rallies” throughout March 2017. In contrast to the German case, however, the Dutch central government became heavily involved in the crisis. Initially, the plane carrying Çavuşoğlu for an unscheduled rally was barred from landing in the Netherlands (Capone and de Guttry 2017: 64). Then the crisis further deepened as the then Turkish Minister of Family and Social Policies, Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya, was forcefully stopped by the Dutch police, searched and prevented from visiting the Turkish Consulate in Rotterdam. Subsequently, the Rotterdam Municipality declared a limited state of emergency in the city and encircled the Turkish Consulate. As the incident made headlines across the world, the Dutch government announced that they had already informed the Turkish government of their refusal to allow political campaigning but Minister Sayan Kaya allegedly insisted to enter the Dutch soil anyway (Capone and de Guttry 2017: 64-65).

Images of Sayan Kaya arguing with Dutch police officers and violent clashes between the minister’s security personnel, Turkish protestors and the Dutch police were widely circulated in social media platforms among Turkish citizens living in Turkey and abroad (Köseoğlu 2017). During the clashes, several Turkish protestors were attacked and injured by Dutch police dogs. These images were often used during the AKP demonstrations across Turkey and formed the basis of the Turkish government’s mistreatment allegations against the Dutch government (Capone and de Guttry 2017). After Sayan Kaya was declared *persona non grata* and expelled from the country, Turkey retaliated in kind by expelling the Dutch ambassador while also threatening to impose economic sanctions.

It has been argued that the unprecedented intensity of the Turkey-Netherlands crisis could have been related to the 15 March 2017 parliamentary election in the Netherlands (İnat 2017; Köseoğlu 2017). Shortly before the row began, the right-wing extremist PVV (Party for Freedom) led by populist demagogue Geert Wilders was expected by some media outlets to significantly increase its votes (İnat 2017). This argument suggests that to curb the influence of Wilders’ anti-immigrant/anti-Turkish rhetoric, the Dutch government needed to show that they could be as anti-Turkish as the PVV. The so-called “Wilders factor” might indeed have been the main reason behind the Dutch government’s uncompromising stance

during the crisis – leading some cynical observers to consider the dramatic events as a “win-win situation” for both the Dutch and Turkish governments (Capone and de Guttery 2017: 65).

The Turkish government discourse regarding the major crises was that both Germany and the Netherlands were under the heavy influence of “Islamophobic fascists” and “Nazi remnants” (İnat 2017). The AKP leadership continuously made references to the crises with Germany and the Netherlands until the day of the referendum (Köseoğlu 2017). Pro-AKP media and government spokespeople put forward several inter-related arguments: 1. European governments curtail the referendum campaign because they supposedly wish to block Turkey’s rise to global power under an effective presidential system, 2. the “no” campaign of the opposition benefit Turkey’s foreign enemies and terrorists, 3. and that the people should approve the constitutional amendments to “teach the West and its domestic puppets a lesson” (İnat 2017; Köseoğlu 2017; *A Haber* 2017; *Hurriyet* 2017).

**Table 1. Support for the AKP Administration in the Netherlands.**

	7 June 2015 (AKP)	1 November 2015 (AKP)	16 April 2017 (“Yes”)
<i>Votes</i>	%64,3	%69,7	%70,94
<i>Votes (number of)</i>	48.526	78.793	82.672
<i>Total Voter Turnout</i>	%31,44	%46,66	%46,83

Source: *Seçim Haberler* (2015a); *Sabah* (2017).

**Table 2. Support for the AKP Administration in Germany.**

	7 June 2015 (AKP)	1 November 2015 (AKP)	16 April 2017 (“Yes”)
<i>Votes</i>	%53,7	%59,7	%63,07
<i>Votes (number of)</i>	255.327	340.249	412.149
<i>Total Voter Turnout</i>	%34,36	%40,79	%46,22

Source: *Seçim Haberler* (2015b); *Sabah* (2017).

If the results of the 16 April 2017 Referendum are evaluated as if it were an ordinary parliamentary election, the number of “yes votes” gathered from Germany and the Netherlands (approximately 500.000 in total in both countries) may not appear large enough to affect the outcome (see **Table 1** and **Table 2**). Yet this was a referendum in which even the

slightest margins could alter the fate of the political system. The AKP administration needed every bit of help to pass its super-presidential system and it ultimately succeeded by obtaining a small margin of %51,41 versus %48,59 (i.e. approximately 25 million “yes votes” compared to approximately 23.8 million “no votes”) (*Sabah* 2017). Nevertheless, public opinion polls had been proven right in their pre-referendum assessment that this was going to be a very close race. Even a few thousand votes mattered; therefore it can be realistically argued that the “yes votes” from Germany and the Netherlands greatly contributed to the consolidation of Turkey’s illiberal populist regime. If so, to what extent Turkey’s crises with the two governments and its broader anti-Western foreign policy rhetoric affected the result?

Several notable public opinion polls assessed the influence of Turkey-Germany and Turkey-the Netherlands crises on the 2017 Referendum. They noted that many voters perceived Ankara as a “victim” that was “bullied” by Europe and that the AKP leaders’ anti-Western statements were largely approved – contributing to the “yes” votes in Turkey and abroad (*Indigo* 2017; *Internet Haber* 2017). An assertive anti-Western stance and two dramatic crises allowed the AKP administration to successfully “internationalise” an essentially domestic issue about constitutional amendments (Esen and Gumuscu 2017: 308).

**Table 1** and **Table 2** indicate that there is clearly a positive correlation between voter turnout in the two countries and support for the AKP administration, as seen in the cases of two parliamentary elections in 2015 and the 2017 Referendum. Normally a complex constitutional referendum – even one that involved a regime change – might not have attracted much interest from the Turkish diaspora. However, images of dramatic diplomatic crises broadcast by media outlets (e.g. the conflict involving Minister Sayan Kaya, Turkish protestors and the Dutch government at Rotterdam) and combative public statements (e.g. “the Nazi remnants”) received a lot of attention. Thus the AKP’s foreign policy proved very effective in terms of preventing voter turnout from falling to 7 June 2015 election levels, and sustained the constituency it created in the 1 November election (see **Table 1** and **Table 2**). If a Turkish citizen believes in the narrative that European governments were bullying Turkey, then the natural reaction would be to vote in favour of the proposed amendments.

Lastly, the pre-referendum anti-Westernism and the diplomatic crises might have had contributed to the “yes campaign” in two other ways not mentioned so far: 1. though this study does not include data about European countries other than Germany and the Netherlands, the crises might have also increased voter turnout and the AKP support among sizable Turkish communities living in Austria, Belgium, France and the UK. 2. The ultra-nationalist MHP was experiencing an intra-party conflict during the run-up to the 2017 Referendum. The constituency of the party was divided between those who agreed with Chairman Devlet Bahçeli’s decision to support the AKP and the dissidents who preferred former party member Meral Akşener’s<sup>9</sup> opposition to the constitutional proposal (Esen and Gumuscu 2017: 311). As the MHP voters are well-known for having an assertive anti-Western outlook, the AKP leadership might have hoped to garner as much support as possible from undecided ultra-nationalists to pass their proposal. In this context, it is important to note that the MHP obtained %10,26 of votes in the Netherlands and %9,72 in Germany in the 7 June 2015 election. Support for the party slightly declined in the 1 November 2015 election, being reduced to %9,1 of votes in the Netherlands and to %7,5 in Germany (*Seçim Haberler* 2015a, 2015b). Tensions with Germany and the Netherlands and

the feeling of victimhood it arguably created among the Turkish diaspora might have convinced the MHP voters to support a referendum that was presented by the Turkish government as a matter of “national salvation”.

In-depth examinations of the above two issues are beyond the scope of this study, but they are certainly stimulating as potential avenues for future research.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article argued that though there is a strong link between domestic politics and foreign policy making in every country, the nature of this relationship radically differs between liberal democracies and less-democratic regimes. While decision-makers are forced to balance the expectations of extra-national actors and domestic concerns in liberal democracies, their counterparts in less-democratic regimes (e.g. illiberal populism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism) usually have a greater autonomy from the international context. Therefore, such leaders are often free to adopt aggressive foreign policy postures that generate them public support – even if this happens at the expense of increasing isolation in global politics. In this context, the anti-Western foreign policy of Turkey has been a case in point as the AKP administration pragmatically utilised it to consolidate illiberal populism at home while experiencing major diplomatic crises with European governments (i.e. Germany and the Netherlands) and the US.

It must be noted that the anti-Westernism of the AKP is not a one-time strategy limited to the case of the 2017 referendum campaign, because the party leadership generally acts in that manner before every key parliamentary, presidential or municipal election. For instance, the run-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections held simultaneously on 24 June 2018 was shaped by a very intense diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Washington over Turkey’s imprisonment of Andrew Brunson, an American Evangelical pastor. Brunson was depicted by the pro-AKP media and the government as a terrorist at the time; and the US President Donald Trump retaliated by threatening Turkey with economic and diplomatic sanctions via numerous *Twitter* messages and public speeches. The crisis rapidly deepened in the months preceding the 24 June 2018 elections. While pro-AKP media outlets fuelled the fires of anti-Americanism with sensational headlines on the issue, notable AKP spokespeople presented the refusal of the Turkish government to negotiate with Washington on the issue as evidence of Turkey’s growing power and independence in global politics. A few months after the electoral victory of the AKP, the alleged “terrorist” Pastor Brunson was released from prison – possibly as part of an agreement with the US. The pastor’s release barely made the news in pro-AKP media outlets such as *Sabah*, *Yeni Şafak* and *A Haber* which had spent many months arguing that the release of the pastor would mean “high treason” and “a grave violation of Turkey’s national security”.<sup>10</sup> The melodramatic escalation and the ultimate anti-climactic end of the “Brunson crisis” is a classic case that highlights the way in which the anti-Western foreign policy discourse is pragmatically operationalized in key moments of Turkish political life.

As of the writing of this article, the subsequent fate of Turkey’s illiberal populist regime hangs on the balance of yet another crucial turning point: the municipal elections envisaged to be held on 31 March 2019. Depending on the results, illiberal populism may be



further consolidated across the country or we may witness to a potential return to Turkey's pre-2013 form of *flawed/semi democracy* – beginning from the level of influential local governments such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Antalya and Adana municipalities – which had been the standard of the country since the mid-1980s. Regardless of the forthcoming trajectory of Turkey, the insights we have derived from the Turkish case here are useful in terms of conceptualising illiberal populist foreign policy making across the world. The lack of a comprehensive volume on the foreign policy of illiberal populist regimes remains a badly neglected gap in the scholarly literature. I hope that this article would contribute towards the understanding of this subject, and that more progress could soon be made with comparative studies of various illiberal populist polities of our time.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Mintz and DeRouen Jr. (2010); Robison (2011); Hill (2016); Brummer and Hudson (2015); Hussain (2011); Evans (2009).
2. For a comprehensive review of these works, see Hudson (2014: 142-160); Hill (2016: 228-258); Robison (2011: 191-197); Breuning (2007: 115-162).
3. For a valuable work seeking to overcome Eurocentrism by attempting to conceptualise the foreign policy making of various less-democratic non-Western societies, see Brummer and Hudson (2015).
4. During the tenure of US President Barack Obama, Washington changed its approach towards Iran. On 2 April 2015, Iran and six world powers (the US, the UK, China, France, Germany and Russia) reached an agreement that would lift a considerable portion of aforementioned economic sanctions. Yet, the Donald Trump administration recently withdrew the US from the agreement. For more information, see Robins-Early and Cook (2018).
5. See the results of the public opinion poll regarding this issue, *En Son Haber* (2018).
6. For a comprehensive critical study of the rise and fall of the Turkish model of democracy, see Tuğal (2016). See also Göksel (2018b: 44-48) and Guida and Göksel (2018).
7. It should be noted that the 15 July 2016 coup attempt was different than past juntas formed by Kemalist officers. The coup attempt appears to have been led by followers of an Islamic fraternity that is now officially recognised by the Turkish state as FETO (Fetullah Gulenist Terrorist Organisation). For more information, see *TRT World* (2017).
8. See, for instance, Göztepe (2018); Kars Kaynar (2018); Sarfati (2017); Akkoyunlu and Öktem (2016); Esen and Gumuscu (2016); Taş (2015); Tuğal (2016); Balta (2018); Boyle (2016); Tharoor (2018); Göksel (2018a).
9. Akşener later founded and began to lead the İYİ (Good) Party which positions itself as a centre-right secular Turkish nationalist political movement.
10. See, for instance, *Sabah* (2018).

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