Understanding contemporary Turkish foreign policy. Global trends and local peculiarities

Iulia-Alexandra Oprea

In the age of hybridity or post-liberal international order characterized by the rise of authoritarian capitalism, competing norms and no overriding set of paradigms in global governance[1], Turkey's loosening relations with the West and slide to authoritarianism have been widely regarded with concern by scholars and policy makers. In this context, "tradition dependent rationality" has come to complement or even replace in some cases the rights-based principles of universal rationality embedded in the Enlightenment thought, turning the spotlight on culture, tradition and religion[2]. Is Turkey's drift towards Islamic/Islamist authoritarianism entrenched in a unique Turkish Muslim experience; a "popular Islamic" adaptation and revival of Kemalism (respectively post-Kemalism) or rather a replica of the global authoritarian expansion?

Researchers have employed different interpretative frameworks to make sense of the AKP's foreign policy. Turkey's warm relations with authoritarian states and engagement with former Ottoman dominions have been interpreted in various ways, ranging from (1) non-ideological manifestation of soft-power[3], to (2) attempts at reviving Turkey's former imperial power[4] by adopting a neo-Ottomanist orientation in

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[1] Ziya Onis and Mustafa Kutlay, «The New Age of Hybridity and Clash of Norms: China, BRICS, and Challenges of Global Governance in a Postliberal International Order», *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political,* 2020.

[2] Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, 216.

[3] Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, «Islam as a statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy», *The New Geopolitics: Middle East, Foreign Policy*, *Brookings*, Washington D.C., November 2018.

[4] Zia Weise, «Turkey's Balkan comeback», *Politico*, 15 May 2018.

foreign policy[5] and/or (3) a coordinated effort to establish a Muslim "Green Axis" by endorsing a pan-Islamist outlook[6], advancing Muslim separatism and even furthering religious radicalization[7], only to mention a few of them. This paper aims to examine Turkey's paradigm shifts in foreign policy under the AKP rule by considering global changes and local particularities.

Ideology and pragmatism are important elements of any political activity, including foreign policy. While ideology provides us with a comprehensive worldview, a set of principles and ideals through which we can interpret and understand events and phenomena occurring in the domestic and international arenas, pragmatism delivers political decisions and implementations, informing us of potential outcomes[8].

According to the realist school of international relations the main goal of states is pragmatic, respectively the pursuit of power. States find themselves in competition in the international arena, consequently, the distribution of economic and military power carries more weight than ideological orientation or domestic political pressures. While realism regards ideology as irrelevant or unnecessary, neorealism associates ideology mostly with conflict and disastrous politics, i.e. the role of nationalism in provoking wars between states. Neoliberalism too, denies any critical function to ideology in international relations. Even though constructivists criticize the excessively materialistic nature of both realism/neorealism and neoliberalism, and include ideational factors such as norms and culture into their analysis of international relations, they too, fail to treat ideology's role exclu-

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[5] Dimitar Bechev, «Erdogan in the Balkans: A neo-Ottoman quest? What is behind Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Serbia?», *Al Jazeera*, 11 October 2017; Inan Rüma,«Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: New Activism, Neo-Ottomanism or/so What?», *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 9, no. 4, 2010.

[6] Mehmet Uğur Ekinci, «Turkey's Balkan Policy and Its Skeptics», *Insight Turkey*, 21, no. 2, 2019.

[7] Srdja Trifkovic, «Turkey as a regional power: Neo-Ottomanism in action», *Politea*, 1, 2011.

[8] Gian Luca Gardini, «Latin American Foreign Policies Between Ideology and Pragmatism: A Framework for Analysis», in Gian Luca Gardini, Peter Lambert (eds), *Latin American Foreign Policies*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, 14.

sively. Ideology, together with other determining factors of the societal context in which decisions are taken – culture, demography, history, institutions – is thoroughly considered in foreign policy analysis, a subfield of international relations[9]. As Cassels shows ideology and the ideological patterns of thought represent means of transmitting and interpreting foreign policy issues to mass audience[10]. Yet, ideology is not only used to persuade the public, but it provides decision-makers too with a framework of interpretation.

In the early days of the Turkish Republic, Kemalists believed that the purpose of foreign and domestic policy is to ensure national and territorial integrity at home[11], rejecting the prospect of conducting an irredentist foreign policy[12]. Along these lines, Turkey refused to participate in the Islamic conferences organized by other Muslim-majority states, on the grounds that they would contradict the secular nature of the state[13]. The choice of neutrality can be explained through the so-called "Sèvres Treaty Syndrome"[14], according to which the international community and their "local agents", respectively Kurdish and non-Muslim minorities, plan to dismember Turkey into smaller ethnic states[15]. Thus, Ankara followed a status quo oriented policy characterized by a "benign neglect" of Middle Eastern affairs and a strong pro-Western stance[16]. This approach dominated Turkish foreign pol-

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[9] Birol Başkan and Ömer Taşpinar, *The Nation or The Ummah. Islamism and Turkish Foreign Policy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2021, 5-8.

[10] Alan Cassels, *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World*, Routledge, London, 1996, 8.

[11] Birol Başkan and Ömer Taşpinar, *The Nation or The Ummah. Islamism and Turkish Foreign Policy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2021, 22.

[12] Şaban Çaliş, Hüseyin Bağci, «Atatürk's Foreign Policy Understanding and Application», Sosyal ve Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi, 218, https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/susead/issue/28437/302927.

[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] Radu Gabriel Safta and Călin Felezeu. *Turcia contemporană între moştenirea kemalistă şi Uniunea Europeană*, CA Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, 79.

[15] Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2006, 232.

[16] Birol Başkan and Ömer Taşpinar, *op. cit.*, 15, 24.

icy, with a few exceptions (see the Cyprus question) until the end of the Cold War[17].

However, starting with the 1990s, there have been major changes in Turkish foreign policy. Turgut Özal's government abandoned Turkey's exclusively Western orientation and isolation, and started cultivating its linguistic, cultural and religious ties with the newly independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia[18]. Özal saw in the fall of communism a historical opportunity to become a regional power[19] and leader of the Turkic world, in the meantime establishing relations with Arab and Balkan states based on their common Ottoman heritage[20]. As a result, Özal's policy was labelled as both pan-Turkic and neo-Ottoman.

After the AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, Turkey has continued and expanded Özal's foreign policy agenda targeting ex-Ottoman dominions. Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and his foreign policy doctrine of "strategic depth" (*Stratejik derinlik*) played a major role in this shift. Davutoğlu defined Turkey as a "pivotal centre" at the crossroads of two continents (contrary to the former understanding which placed the country at the periphery of Europe or Middle East), describing it as the inheritor of the Ottoman empire. The attempt to win the "hearts and minds" of former Ottoman dominions was explained in terms of "soft power" and enabled Turkey to engage culturally and economically with non-Western states from Africa to the Caucasus[21].

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[17] Kemal Kirişci, «Turkey and the United States: Ambivalent Allies», *MERIA-Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, 1998, 2, no. 4.

[18] Nora Fisher Onar, «Neo Ottomanism, Historical Legacies and Turkish Foreign Policy», *EDAM Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, Discussion Paper Series*, October 2009.

[19] Dietrich Jung, Wolfango Piccoli, *Pan-Turkist Dreams and Post-Soviet Realities: The Turkish Republic and the Turkic States in the 1990s*, Zed Books, London, 2000, 8.

[20] Ömer Taspinar, «Turkey's Middle East Policies between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism», *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2008, no. 10, 11, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf (14.04.2023)

[21] Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Istar Gözaydın, «Frame for Turkey's Foreign Policy via the Diyanet in the Balkans», *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 7, no. 3, 2018, 334-335.

This foreign policy mirrored the AKP's "moves" at home. In its first decade of governance the AKP has gained the loyalty of different social groups, including the Gülen movement, and extended its own margins of action through consensus and inclusiveness, by promoting an open, multicultural identity discourse aiming to embrace the formerly suppressed Islamic/Islamist strata, the Kurdish minority and the historical non-Muslim minorities based on an Islamic-Ottoman inspired *Weltanschauung*. However, as Thomas[22] explains hegemonies can be achieved by consent, but also by domination over opponents, after ensuring a strong base of supporters. While initially the AKP focused on building its hegemonic bloc at home and abroad – through its transnational networks and organizations –, avoiding divisive rhetoric, after securing support of a majority it resorted to a dominance strategy, gradually targeting the "strong state" tradition and later, after the failed coup attempt in 2016, going after rival Islamic actors, i.e. the Gülen movement. The outcome was Islamist, nationalist and authoritarian "strong" state, labelled by some authors as post-Kemalist, since it was believed to "inherit" authoritarianism from the early Kemalist republic[23].

Başkan and Taşpinar, argue that the "Turkish model" turned into a "marriage" of secular nationalism and religious nationalism. Moreover, based on the AKP's warm welcome of the Arab Spring, they point to Islamism as the leading foreign policy ideology during this period. However, they warn that in the Turkish context Islamism is a "thin" ideology, it sets broad interpretable objectives but no clear action plan, leaving room for maneuver[24]. Thus, pragmatism, mercantilism, and opportunism too played a prominent role: Turkey initially opposed military intervention in Libya, due to its economic ties with the regime, and left the Gulf countries to decide over the faith of Yemen and Bahrain, while in other places, such as Egypt, it called for a regime change[25]. Another example of ideological inconsisten-

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[22] Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism*, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 2009, 163.

[23] Sevgi Kuru Açıkgöz, «Kemalism and Post-Kemalism: Turkish State in Search of Palatable Citizen Forever», *Turkish Journal of Politics,* 5, no. 2, 2014, 33.

[24] Birol Başkan and Ömer Taşpinar, *op. cit.*, 4.

[25] *Ibidem*, 3.

cy is former prime minister, incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 2003 unsuccessful effort to convince the Turkish parliament to support the US invasion of Iraq, while later, he sided with Russia in Syria, to eradicate Islamist insurgents, a choice that hardly can be labelled as Islamist. Moreover, he purchased the S-400 air defence system from Russia, regardless of NATO's objections. He has also collaborated with Iran against the Kurdish rule in Kirkuk in favour of the Shia Iraqi government, despite the Sunni-Shia differences between the two countries and thus, threatening his stance as a Sunni Islamist leader[26]. Consequently, geopolitical and economic interests seem to weigh more in the AKP's decisions than ideology.

These developments lead us to the following questions: Is there a "Turkish model"? And if so, is the "Turkish model" *really* Turkish? Does it imply a unique, *essentially Turkish* way of doing politics? Is the "Turkish model", if at all, secular or religious/Islamic/Islamist, national or multicultural, pro- or anti-Western, democratic or authoritarian? Are growing authoritarianism and anti-Westernism in Turkey linked to Islamic nationalism or rather a reaction to the neoliberal globalization? As seen, throughout its history, Ankara has employed different ideological tools in both its domestic and foreign policy. Identities and ideologies change over time and respond to local and global realities. As researchers we tend to "zoom in" and isolate the subject, trying to find a backbone that provides us with an all-encompassing story, sometimes to the extent of losing sight of the big picture. As Danforth shows a proper way to interpret contemporary politics in Turkey is to integrate local developments into global trend[27].

Let us first consider authoritarianism. Diamond argues that "authoritarianism has gone global", labelling it as the third global trend since the fall of communism in his classification. The first trend was

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[26] Guney Yildiz, «How Erdogan's Actions Challenge US Authority And Reshape Middle East Alliances», *Forbes*, 18 April 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/guneyyildiz/2023/04/18/president-erdogans-outsized-role-in-waning-us-role-in-the-middle-east/?sh=5afd36556692 (30.04.2023).

[27] Nicholas Danforth, «Post-Kemalism and the Future of Turkish Governance», *ELIAMEP-MEDYASCOPE Media Series (ELIMED)*, December 14, 2022, https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/ο-μετακεμαλισμός-και-το-μέλλον-της-του/ (13.04.2023).

marked by the "democratic surge" up to mid-2000s, when democracy gained momentum, registering a significant expansion of free electoral democracies around the world. The second trend saw the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes, which, however, acted locally by supressing opposition. In the third, respectively current stage, authoritarian governments have started to project their influence over the borders, a move visible especially in their media initiatives abroad, seeking to undermine Western democracies[28]. The current wave of authoritarianism across the globe is the result of the crisis of neoliberal globalization, which as Bonnano shows, produces a dual authoritarian reaction: from above, through a repressive rule, and from below, by encouraging far-right populist, ultra-nationalist attitudes contesting neoliberal global order and liberal democracy[29].

According to Freedom House's latest report published in March 2023, over the past seventeen years freedom declined globally. Today only one fifth of the world's population lives in free countries[30]. Weak democracies around the world have gradually transformed themselves into authoritarian regimes. Economically, however, they still play by the rules of capitalism. Turkey's growing authoritarianism and estrangement with the West, seems to fit into a broader global trend, led by the "Big Five", respectively China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, aiming to challenge and counter the EU's influence[31] by promoting an alternative integration model – distinguished through authoritarian capitalism and illiberal governance[32] and thus, unconditioned by liberal political reform[33].

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[28] Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Christopher Walker, *Authoritarianism goes global: the challenge to democracy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 3-5.

[29] Berch Berberoglu, *The Global Rise of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century*, Routledge, 2021, 4-5.

[30] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023*, March 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigtalPDF.pdf (28.04.2023)

[31] Zoran Radosavljevic and Sam Morgan, «The Brief – Macron pulls the Balkan rug», *Euractiv*, 25 April 2018.

[32] Ziya Onis and Mustafa Kutlay, *op. cit.*

[33] Oya Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey-West Relations: The Politics of Intra-alliance Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Önis and Kutlay coined the concept of age of hybridity in global governance, referring to the power transitions resulted in the process of "democratization of globalization", unaccompanied by a "globalization of democratization". The new "order" has enabled non-Western, previously excluded powers to participate more assertively in international relations, while this emerging pluralism, largely represented by illiberal states, has led to a decline of liberal democracy. Önis and Kutlay reserved a special place to China in this novel style of multilateralism, claiming that its model of authoritarian capitalism, known also as the Beijing Consensus, is increasingly seen as an attractive alternative to Western-style development, thanks to its "no strings attached" policy. The Chinese success story has become even more alluring, considering the economic crises in several emerging countries, including Turkey, generated by the liberalization of capital without adequate institutional and macroeconomic safeguards[34].

Öktem and Akkoyunlu identified the following common features of competitive authoritarian regimes: they are ruled by democratically elected charismatic leaders, who engage in divisive rhetoric by mobilizing the "nation" against the "old elites", use political parties to create consent, bring independent institutions under state control and serve their clients[35]. Thus, in addition to the "democratization of globalization" we can certainly talk about a "globalization of populism" as well. While scholarship tends to explain the AKP's changing policy from secular, liberal and pro-Western, to Islamist, authoritarian and anti-Western by referring to a single – Islamist – or two – conservative and Islamist –, comprehensive (and sometimes) hidden party agenda, Taş argues that there were several AKPs since the early 2000s articulating different foreign policy objectives, the only constant being populism[36].

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[34] Ziya Onis and Mustafa Kutlay, *op. cit.*

[35] Kerem Öktem and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, «Exit from democracy: illiberal governance in Turkey and beyond», *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16, no. 4, 2016, 470.

[36] Hakkı Taş, «Continuity through change: populism and foreign policy in Turkey», *Third World Quarterly*, 43, no. 12, 2871-2872, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436597.2022.2108392 (14.04.2023)

As Mudde and Kaltwasser shows, populism is a very diverse political phenomenon. Some populist actors are left-leaning while others identify with the political right, they can be conservative or progressive, religious or secular[37]. Consequently, in the words of Naím "populism is not an ideology. Instead, it's a strategy to obtain and retain power"[38]. Bell has already claimed in 1960s that populist political discourses mark "the end of ideology", thus there is no grand idea or theory left, since political parties compete for power by solely promising economic growth[39].

If populism is not an ideology, then, what is it? Despite on-going debates, political scientists were unable to agree upon an all-encompassing definition, yet, they agreed populism has two essential components: 1. anti-elitism (dividing the society between the people and the elites) and people-centrism (politics as the expression of the general will)[40]. Thus, populists appeal to economically vulnerable voters dissatisfied with mainstream elites, who are hostile to immigrants and ethno-cultural and religious diversity. Usually, they believe that minorities and immigrants threaten their community, national unity, social and economic security and lifestyle[41]. This theorization attempt shares similarities with the definition of competitive authoritarianism: charismatic leadership, divisive narratives and patronage. Populists are often (or are aiming to become) competitive authoritarians while competitive authoritarians frequently use populism as an instrument to stay in power. In Turkey's case, the anti-establishment politics and plebiscitary understanding of democracy are close-

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[37] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, «Populism around the world», *Populism: A Very Short Introduction, Very Short Introductions*, Oxford Academic, New York, 2017.

[38] Moisés Naím, «How to Be a Populist», *The Atlantic*, 21 April 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/trump-populism-lepen/523491/ (21.04.2023).

[39] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*, 13.

[40] Hakkı Taş, *op. cit.*, 2870.

[41] Ayhan Kaya, «The Rise of Populist Extremism in Europe: What is Populism?», *Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe Work Package 2: Work in Progress Critical Analysis Tool (CAT) 1: The rise of populist extremism in Europe: Theoretical Tools for Comparison*, Istanbul Bilgi University, 1 December 2016, 15.

ly linked to Erdoğan's Manichean worldview. He has positioned himself as the representative of "New Turkey" – respectively the "golden era" of stability, advanced democracy and prosperity – as opposed to the "establishment" or "Old Turkey", deeply corrupted, unstable, poor, placed under military tutelage[42]; as the spokesperson of society, of the "silent majority" against the state or "happy minority"; of "Black Turks" versus "White Turks"[43].

Ideologies, "grand ideas" do not simply disappear with the adoption of a populist discourse. Contrarily, all populists, including Erdoğan, combine populism with one or more "host" ideologies[44]. In the initial years of governance, the founders of the AKP defined themselves as "conservative democrats", inspired by European Christian democrats, distancing themselves from Islamism[45]. In the meantime, the party referred to the Ottoman myth as means of legitimizing liberalism and pluralism. In this period the "people" Erdoğan addressed were conservative Anatolians oppressed by the "establishment", respectively the secular Kemalist elite. Starting with 2008, the AKP successfully managed to eliminate the secular/Kemalist control over the judiciary and military, through the EU reforms, Constitutional Referendum and the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer Trials. The AKP's "people" turned into Sunni Muslims, while the "establishment" was represented by the so-called "Deep State". The idea of Muslim nationhood and leadership was strengthened by the EU's offer of privileged partnership instead of full membership, growing Islamophobia in the West and the Arab Spring. In this new environment, Ankara embraced neo-Ottomanism and Islamism, aiming to position itself as a leader of the *ummah*. The Gezi protests of 2013 and the 15 July coup attempt represented another turn in Turkish politics. After crushing Kemalists, the AKP has found another "elite" to oppose: the West and the international organizations, determined to divide Tur-

[42] Orçun Selçuk, «Strong presidents and weak institutions: populism in Turkey, Venezuela and Ecuador», *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 16, issue 4, 2016, 578.

[43] Hakkı Taş, *op. cit.*, 2875.

[44] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*

[45] S. Erdem Aytaç and Ezgi Elçi, «Populism in Turkey», *Populism around the world: A comparative perspective*, 2019, 94.

key. The "people" were rebranded in the populist discourse as Turkish Muslims fighting imperialism; and the inclusive, tolerant Ottoman myth was replaced with the narrative of Turks embodying defensive Ottomans, waging a war for survival[46].

As seen, ideological choices, "assisted" by global trends, can be used as tools to "interpret" and/or "capitalize" on political unfolding. Ideational frames can change together with political goals and can rely on apparently contradicting political cultures and practices. However, whether a political actor pursues a certain policy within a clear ideational framework out of mere pragmatism or due to a strong ideological commitment is less important than the actual results it produces. A harmful policy or regrettable alliance designed with the sole purpose to maintain or gain a certain advantage can create dangerous precedents and breeding ground for further decline in the affected area. Of course, pragmatism has no inherent positive or negative meaning; it can reap beneficial, disquieting or mixed effects. Regardless of the proponents' intentions, there can be undesired side-effects.

It would be mistaken to believe that only illiberal leaders follow the "end-justifies-the-means policy" in their foreign relations. Very often, liberal democratic leaders too act similarly in the international arena, and close an eye to authoritarian behaviour in order to achieve economic and security goals. In a globalized world, characterized by interdependence and overlapping interests, it becomes harder to navigate international relations. Even so, liberal leaders should firmly uphold democratic values[47].

Turkey's domestic and foreign policy choices cannot be properly understood without an in-depth analysis of the global developments and their impact on the country. Competing authoritarianism and populism can provide us with a (more) coherent framework of analysis than simply pointing to ideologies and/or "hidden agendas" as determinants of politics. This is not to claim that ideologies are insignificant or that Turkey's slide towards authoritarianism and disengagement with the West has nothing to do with local realities. Also, this does not signify that there is no "Turkish model". However, we

[46] Hakkı Taş, *op. cit.*, 2875-2883.
[47] Freedom House*, op. cit.*, 32-35.

must acknowledge the limits of such a model, embedded or at least reflective of the global developments. Therefore, the *Turkish way of doing politics*, it is not *essentially Turkish*, but partly global or globally defined. Context can tell us if a global trend will be adopted and/or adapted locally, while ideology provides the framework, the "how" and the "why" of a certain policy.

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