



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**EXAMINING THE AK PARTY GOVERNMENT'S DISCOURSE ON SYRIAN
MIGRANTS IN TÜRKİYE THROUGH THE LENS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

Master's Thesis

Hilal Demir

Department of Political Science and Public Administration

Master of Arts in Political Science

November 2025



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Assist. Prof. Dr. Seval Yaman

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ETHICS STATEMENT

I hereby declare that I have collected all the written and audio-visual material presented in this thesis in accordance with academic rules and ethical principles; that I have fully cited and referenced all material that is not original to this work in compliance with scientific norms; and that this thesis is the product of my own original work except where indicated by referencing.

Hilal Demir



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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to examine the migration discourse shaped under the AK Party government in Türkiye through the lens of right-wing populism, focusing on Syrian migrants. Populism is regarded as a dynamic political approach that manifests in diverse forms across contemporary geographical and political settings. Although there is no single universally accepted definition in the literature, populism is most commonly conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology or a political strategy built upon a dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites”. Nonetheless, how populism is formed and functions differ considerably depending on the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that surround it. In this respect, right-wing populism, often associated with anti-migrant sentiment and xenophobia, may offer a useful model for Western contexts. Yet, it remains insufficient for explaining the diverse practices that emerge in other political and cultural environments.

Prominently, anti-migrant and xenophobic discourses and policies in Western right-wing populist movements receive widespread public support. The politicization and securitization of migration serve as instruments strongly associated with right-wing populism. Within the study, the AK Party, often classified as right-wing populist in the literature, is examined as an example that diverges from conventional definitions of right-wing populism. Instead of adopting the anti-migrant discourse prevalent in Western contexts, the AK Party demonstrates an inclusive approach toward migrants, distinguishing it from conventional definitions of right-wing populism in the literature.

In this regard, the study conducts a thematic analysis of various speeches by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the context of migration. This analysis aims to reveal how the AK Party’s migration discourse diverges from the anti-migrant narratives of right-wing populist parties in the West. In doing so, it seeks to understand how Syrian migrants are positioned within the “us versus them” dichotomy in the discourse.

Keywords: Right-wing Populism, Migration, Migrant Identity, Thematic Analysis, Discourse Theory

ÖZET

Bu tez, Türkiye’de AK Parti iktidarında şekillenen göç söylemini, sağ popülizm bağlamında Türkiye’deki Suriyeli göçmenler üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Popülizm, günümüzde farklı coğrafyalarda ve siyasal bağlamlarda çeşitli biçimlerde ortaya çıkan dinamik bir siyasal yaklaşım olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Literatürde üzerinde uzlaşılan tek bir tanım bulunmamakla birlikte, popülizm çoğunlukla “saf halk” ile “yozlaşmış elitler” arasındaki karşıtlık üzerine kurulu ince merkezli bir ideoloji veya siyasal strateji olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, popülizmin nasıl inşa edildiği ve işlev gördüğü, içinde yer aldığı toplumsal, kültürel, ekonomik ve siyasal koşullara bağlı olarak önemli ölçüde değişmektedir. Bu anlamda, göçmen karşıtlığı ve yabancı düşmanlığı ile özdeşleşen sağ popülizm Batı için uygun bir model sağlamakla birlikte farklı siyasal ve kültürel bağlamlarda çeşitlenen pratikleri açıklamakta yetersiz kalabilmektedir.

Özellikle Batıdaki sağ popülist örneklerde öne çıkan göçmen karşıtı ve yabancı düşmanı söylem ve politikalar halktan da destek görmektedir. Göçün siyasallaştırılması ve güvenlikleştirilmesi sağ popülizm ile sıkı sıkıya bağlı bir araç olarak işlev görmektedir. Bu anlamda literatürde sıklıkla sağ popülist olarak sınıflandırılan AK Parti, bu çalışmada, artan göç hareketlerine rağmen Batıdaki göçmen karşıtı söylemi benimsemeyen, aksine göçmenlere yönelik kapsayıcı tutumu ile literatürdeki sağ popülizm tanımlamalarından farklılaşan bir örnek olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Bu doğrultuda çalışmada Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’ın göç bağlamındaki çeşitli konuşmaları tematik analiz yoluyla incelenmektedir. Bu analiz ile AK Parti’nin göç söyleminin Batı’daki sağ popülist partilerin göçmen karşıtı anlatılarından nasıl ayrıştığının ortaya konulması hedeflenmektedir. Böylece söylemde “biz ve öteki” dikotomisi içerisinde Suriyeli göçmenlerin ne şekilde konumlandırıldığı anlaşılmaya çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sağ Popülizm, Göç, Göçmen Kimliği, Tematik Analiz, Söylem Teorisi

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the concept of populism is regarded as a dynamic political approach that manifests itself in various forms across different geographies and political contexts. Although there is no singular or universally accepted definition in the literature, populism is widely understood as a thin-centered ideology or political strategy that pits “the pure people” against “the corrupt elites” (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 6; Moffitt, 2016, 51–53). Accordingly, populism rests on the idea that “the pure people” represent a specific segment of society, and that those who make such a claim are often deemed populist (Müller, 2016, 19–22). However, the way populism is performed and perceived varies depending on specific socio-political contexts. Consequently, populism does not exhibit the same characteristics across contexts, as local cultural, economic, religious, and political factors play a central role in shaping the development of populist narratives (Ron - Nadesan, 2020, 4–5).

Debates on populism, particularly in Western cases, reveal that one of the key features of right-wing populist movements is their emphasis on anti-migrant discourse and policies (Shehaj et al., 2021, 282–283). Economic and cultural concerns arising from increased migration flows facilitate the mobilization of support for these parties. Indeed, right-wing populist actors use anti-migrant sentiments as an effective political tool and consolidate their public and electoral support by portraying migrants as threats to national unity through an exclusionary “us versus them” dichotomy. (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 6).

However, it is clear that populism does not manifest with the same characteristics or functions across all social and political contexts, with Türkiye being a noteworthy exception. The AK Party, frequently classified as right-wing populist in the literature, appears to diverge from typical right-wing populist patterns in its approach to migrants, as it tends to avoid divisive rhetoric and often adopts a more inclusive stance, despite the intense migration flows Türkiye faced. According to Mudde, although the AK Party exhibits certain features of right-wing populist parties in the West, the intensity and manner of its use of populist elements vary depending on temporal and contextual factors (Mudde, 2017). Thus, examining the characteristics of the AK Party’s discourses on migration in Türkiye can provide valuable insights.

In light of these considerations, this study investigates whether the AK Party’s official migration discourse diverges from right-wing populist parties’ migration narratives, and if it

does, how it differs. In the case of Türkiye, despite the increasing presence of migrants in recent years, the AK Party's avoidance of anti-migrant discourse and, conversely, its adoption of a more inclusive stance toward migrants is a notable phenomenon. Within this framework, the study analyzes the local dynamics, socio-economic factors, and the influence of the religious-conservative political tradition shaping the AK Party's migration discourse, to explore if the party diverges from classical right-wing populist tendencies.

In line with this general objective, the study seeks to address the following sub-questions:

- 1) How are official migration discourses shaped in Türkiye despite the rise of anti-migrant attitudes, and how do these attitudes influence the official discourse?
- 2) How is the perception of migrants constructed within the AK Party's discourse?
- 3) Does the AK Party's discourse position migrants within the classic populist dichotomy of "the people" versus "the corrupt elite"?

Accordingly, the research conducted within the framework of these questions aims to clarify the role of Türkiye's unique political and cultural context in shaping the AK Party's migration discourse. In line with the research questions, the study also seeks to examine why the AK Party, widely regarded in the literature as a right-wing populist party, does not necessarily adopt the anti-migrant discourse and policies commonly employed by right-wing populist parties in the West. The factors potentially influencing the AK Party's stance on migrants are analyzed in relation to the "us versus them" dichotomy, socio-economic conditions, and other dynamics specific to Türkiye.

Against this backdrop, the central focus of the study is to explore how the AK Party's approach to migrants aligns with traditional right-wing populism, particularly in terms of the anti-migrant discourse commonly associated with it in the literature. In doing so, the research seeks to contribute to the existing literature and provide an alternative perspective on the relationship between populism and migration.

In order to achieve these objectives, the study begins with a review of the literature on populism theories and evaluates the core characteristics of right-wing populism concerning migration. Subsequently, the Turkish context is addressed by providing a theoretical and historical background that aims to understand the discourses of the AK Party. Within this framework, the populist tradition in Türkiye, including the right-conservative populist discourse lineage that has evolved since the Demokrat Party (DP), and how the AK Party has inherited and adapted this legacy, is examined. The focal point of the section is to understand how the AK Party employs populist elements, constructs a definition of "us" around the

concepts of “national will” and “the people”. Thus, the literature review conducted in the first chapter aims to establish a conceptual and analytical framework for the analysis by examining both the theoretical discussions on populism and the literature on the AK Party’s populist characteristics.

In the second chapter, the relationship between migration and populism is examined comprehensively as part of the study’s literature review on migration. The chapter first discusses the theoretical debates on migration and its categorization. Subsequently, in line with the aim and conceptual framework of the study, the contexts of migration and right-wing populism are integrated. The scope is gradually narrowed down to Türkiye and the AK Party. In this context, the chapter reviews the politicization of migration, the approach toward migrants in right-wing populism, and the relevant literature focusing on Türkiye and the AK Party. Instead of strictly adhering to a traditional understanding of migration, the chapter is structured to provide an understanding of the notions of migration and migrant in relation to right-wing populism in a meaning-oriented approach. This intertwined approach aims to ensure coherence with the overall scope of the study and facilitate comprehension in the analysis section.

The third chapter is structured to outline the methodological and theoretical framework of the study. In line with the study’s objectives, it explains the criteria used to determine the sample and describes how the selected method, thematic analysis, is applied. At this stage, the chapter explains the logic behind codes and themes by elaborating the process by which codes and themes are derived from the texts. Finally, it discusses each theme and code used in the analysis in terms of their rationale and scope, thereby establishing a solid foundation for the subsequent analytical section.

In the last chapter, which is the analysis part of the study, the chapter uses codes and themes to examine how migrants are positioned within the party’s official discourses. It also investigates which conceptual elements they are associated with and how they are included or excluded from the construction of the “us” definition. Based on this framework, the case of Türkiye and the AK Party is examined to assess whether it diverges from the Western right-wing populist pattern. Furthermore, the analysis investigates the hegemonic aims of this discourse and its functions within Türkiye’s unique political context.

At this stage, the research consists of two main phases:

In the initial phase, a literature review is conducted, focusing on the central concepts of the study, populism and migration. This review establishes the broader context by examining the

interplay between populism, migration, and the AK Party, thereby providing both a historical overview and an analytical foundation for the subsequent analysis.

The second phase of the study encompasses the third and fourth chapters, which constitute the methodology and analysis sections.

In light of these considerations, the ultimate aim of the study is to explore the extent to which the AK Party diverges from the prevailing anti-migrant stance observed in right-wing populism, as well as to examine the position of Syrian migrants within the “us versus them” dichotomy. In doing so, the study demonstrates that right-wing populist discourse, although it is often equated with anti-migrant sentiment, does not have a universal nature but varies depending on specific contextual factors. The case of Türkiye thus offers an alternative perspective to the literature on the relationship between migration and populism, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse manifestations of populism.

CHAPTER 1. POPULISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: FROM GLOBAL DEFINITIONS TO THE AK PARTY CASE

The first chapter of this study delineates three main components that constitute the foundation for the subsequent chapters. This initial section aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the populism literature by articulating frequently used definitions, theoretical frameworks, and current debates, thereby clarifying the dimensions of populism and the criteria that define it within contemporary political discourse.

The second section shifts the focus of populism literature towards the Turkish case by examining the historical legacy of the AK Party and situating it within the broader historical trajectory of Türkiye's right-wing populist tradition, which also constitutes the party's discursive heritage. Particular focus is given to influential actors such as the Demokrat Party, the Adalet Party (AP), and political formations emerging from the Milli Görüş Movement (National Vision Movement) under Necmettin Erbakan's leadership. Within this historical context, the aim is to highlight the ideological and rhetorical continuities that have shaped right-wing populist tradition in Türkiye and to demonstrate how they remain influential in shaping the AK Party's current political stance.

Finally, the last section seeks to clarify the specific elements of populism manifested within the AK Party government through a review of the relevant literature. Furthermore, this literature incorporates selected quotations from speeches delivered by the AK Party's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to illustrate key aspects of the party's populist discourse. Taking into account the historical legacy as well as current political and social changes, the characteristics of the AK Party's populism within the context of contemporary Türkiye and the continuity of these features from the past are critically examined. This approach enables a more precise positioning of the AK Party within the Turkish political landscape and facilitates a deeper understanding of the populist dynamics that dominate its discourse and practices.

1.1. Defining Populism: A Literature Review of Existing Perspectives

What is populism? What is it not? Providing a clear and universally accepted answer to these questions is challenging and may even be somewhat illusory. The concept of populism has long been a subject of intense debate within academic discourse, largely due to its

ambiguous nature and the fact that it is open to diverse interpretations. In the literature, populism has been characterized within different frameworks, attributed both positive and negative connotations, and its definitions have occasionally been critiqued and revised over time. Populism, as a substantive concept for understanding contemporary politics, is a term that is essential to understanding, yet contested due to its widespread use and diverse definitions (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 11). The main obstacle in comprehending populism, as Taggart highlights, is that inherently a slippery concept, lacking the definitive characteristics needed to formulate a precise and universal definition. Therefore, assuming that there is a “perfect fit” definition and formulation for populism would be misleading (Taggart, 2000, 2).

Various definitions of populism proposed by scholars and authors, as presented below, illustrate this point effectively. Due to its vagueness, a widely accepted view is that populism is not an ideology by itself, nor, as Taggart indicates, is it anchored in any fixed ideological “key values” (Taggart, 2000, 5). Rather, it functions as a label that can be attached to a range of different ideologies. For this very reason, studies on populism often begin by emphasizing the conceptual ambiguity of the term and the absence of a universally accepted definition. They tend to move from broad theoretical definitions to a context-specific conceptualization of populism adopted in accordance with the objectives and scope of the study (Kivrak Koroğlu, 2020, 76).

Given these definitional challenges, the conceptual confusion regarding populism has given rise to a range of divergent approaches. These differences are shaped by whether populism is interpreted as a positive or negative concept, how it is categorized as an ideology, a discourse, or a strategy, which characteristics it is expected to include, and under what conditions and in what forms it tends to manifest itself (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 12). The existence and comparative analysis of these approaches are valuable for identifying the specific features that define an actor or movement as populist, also for constructing an appropriate methodological framework tailored to the objectives of the study (Gidron - Bonikowski, 2013, 16). Whether explicitly stated or implied, the definitional core attributed to populism can be addressed through these approaches, which foster a deeper comprehension of various political processes and discourses, and enable scholars to draw a distinction between populist and non-populist actors. In distinguishing between populist and non-populist actors, the definition of populism adopted in a study plays a crucial role. Nonetheless, the distinct forms of populist expression across different contexts significantly affect whether a particular action or discourse can be classified within this framework (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 12).

A further difficulty in addressing populism arises from the differences encountered in the

classification of the approaches. Referring to shifts in meaning and how its approaches are classified, K  ro  lu treats populism in the plural form as “populisms” (Kivrak K  ro  lu, 2020, 75). According to Tarchi (2016), populism has been conceptualized in terms of two main tendencies in academic debates, as a mere mode of political action and as a symbolic construction with ideology-like features (Tarchi, 2016, 100–103). On the other hand, the populism literature identifies a third prominent perspective, the discursive approach, which also holds a significant place in the study of populism. Although these three main approaches are frequently identified in literature, along with various other perspectives on populism, they should not be regarded as having developed in isolation from one another.

In line with this, populism is often defined within the ideational approach, which places the antagonistic confrontation between “the people” and “the elite” at the core of its analysis. This perspective frequently constitutes a substantial component of scholarly definitions and debates on populism. Introduced by Mudde and Kaltwasser in 2004, the ideational approach, which conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, has become the dominant framework in the literature and has gained notable agenda-setting influence, particularly among comparativists (Katsambekis, 2022, 58; Moffitt - Tormey, 2014, 383). Mudde and Kaltwasser describe populism as one of the key political concepts of the twenty-first century, examine several major approaches to its interpretation, and propose their own understanding of the concept without claiming to provide a universal definition (Kivrak K  ro  lu, 2020, 77; Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 1). Accordingly, populism is a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volont   g  n  rale* (general will) of the people (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 6). Indeed, Ron and Nadesan present a minimalist definition noting the lack of commonly accepted essential features of the term, and describe it as a mode of political interaction referring to “the people” (Ron - Nadesan, 2020, 4–5). Similarly, M  ller, a prominent figure in the field of populism studies who approaches the concept as an inner logic, argues that the claim that only a certain segment of the population constitutes the real people is fundamental to populism. He states that for a political actor or movement to be considered populist, making such a claim is a defining criterion (M  ller, 2016, 33–36).

The ideological approach differentiates itself from other perspectives by emphasizing that concrete populist expressions and movements are rooted more in populist ideas than in social, economic, or political contexts. In this approach, populism is defined as a discourse, a thin-centered ideology, or a worldview (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 16; Hawkins - Kaltwasser, 2022,

515). Accordingly, populism is ideological in nature. However, it ultimately does not demonstrate sufficient coherence or a grounded manifestation to be considered an ideology (Hawkins - Kaltwasser, 2022, 514). It is another widely accepted characteristic of populism that the concept does not constitute an ideology on its own, nor is it tied to a set of “key values,” rather, it is appended as a qualifier to various ideologies. In this sense, the underlying ideology of a populist actor can be situated within a broad spectrum. While literature primarily distinguishes between right-wing and left-wing populism, concepts such as religion, nationalism, conservatism, and secularism also fall within this spectrum. By intertwining with various ideologies, populist discourse and actions expand the appeal to broader segments of the population, thereby consolidating their position against competing camps (Hawkins, 2019, 57). In populist discourse, “the people and the elites”, to put it differently, “us versus them” are shaped by the populist actor or the socio-political environment they create, and that antagonism is defined through the actor’s underlying ideology (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 33–34). Accordingly, the formation of the indicated antagonistic distinction in populist understanding and its concrete socio-political manifestation are shaped by the set of values stemming from the underlying ideology, which defines “us” and “them” according to it, ultimately serving as a guiding framework (Hawkins, 2019, 60). Katsambekis, who adopts the discursive approach, highlights three core features that distinguish the ideational approach from other conceptualizations of populism. First, populism is characterized as a thin-centred ideology, which lies at the core of this approach. Second, a key assumption of the ideational approach is the existence of clearly defined, homogeneous, and antagonistic social groups typically framed as “the pure people versus the corrupt elite,” which are central to populist narratives. Finally, and crucially, there is an emphasis on the moral dimension of this antagonism, as it not only identifies social divisions but also morally justifies the conflict by portraying one group as virtuous and the other as corrupt or illegitimate (Katsambekis, 2022, 58).

Building on these distinctions, the discursive approach emerges as another frequently adopted framework in populism studies. Its foundations are largely grounded on Ernesto Laclau’s early works, which continue to serve as a significant point of reference in the field (Panizza - Stavrakakis, 2021, 21). In the discursive approach to populism, no minimal or comprehensive definition of the concept has been explicitly provided. Although various studies acknowledge that populist features emerge within discourse and thus should be analyzed at the discursive level, the absence of a common definition adopted by the approach has led to criticism that it fails to offer a comprehensive conceptual framework in response to the question of what populism actually is (Moffitt, 2016, 45). Similarly, Aslanidis argues that in the absence

of discursive manifestations, the identification of populist practices in other domains is hardly feasible. Moreover, any attempt to define populism without engaging with the discursive approach fails to provide a meaningful conceptual framework. In the process of analysis, he highlights the limitations of the ideational approach in operationalizing indicators of populism and, in contrast, emphasizes the analytical convenience and flexibility offered by the discursive approach (Aslanidis, 2016, 98). While acknowledging Mudde's significant contributions to the study of populism, Aslanidis critiques the approach as conceptually and methodologically problematic. He contrasts the ideational approach's use of the "ideology" or "thin-centred ideology" as a general concept with the discursive approach, which serves as a more flexible, rapidly transmissible, and adaptable framework that transcends traditional ideological boundaries (Aslanidis, 2016, 98–99). Indeed, discourse constitutes one of the primary sources of analysis in studies conducted from the perspective of the ideational approach, indicating a discernible tendency toward, or convergence with, the discursive perspective (Moffitt, 2016, 40).

Another prominent perspective on populism is the strategic approach, which defines the concept not by a specific ideological content but rather as a political tool employed in the pursuit and maintenance of power. This approach fundamentally assumes that the essence of populism is to be found less in a discourse or ideology centered on the antagonistic division between "the people and elites," and more in political practices and organizational structure. A prominent scholar advocating this view, Weyland, defines populism as "...a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland, 2001, 14). Within this framework, the leader establishes a direct connection with the people they represent and disintermediates or subordinates traditional political intermediary institutions, such as parties, unions, or the media, to serve their political objectives. Similarly, Hans-Georg Betz conceptualizes populism, particularly in the context of the radical right, as a political strategy that mobilizes voter dissatisfaction and anti-system sentiments. Accordingly, this strategy is particularly successful in contexts where conventional forms of institutional representation have weakened, and widespread dissatisfaction prevails, as it effectively mobilizes the emotional responses of the population (Betz, 1993). The contributions of both Weyland and Betz thus enable the use of the strategic approach in populism studies, allowing for the analysis of populist movements across diverse ideological spectrums, focusing on their formal and organizational characteristics.

Beyond the ongoing debate over what populism is, an equally important point is that the

presence or absence of populism is not a fundamental determinant in political analysis. Rather than providing a precise explanation of the causes or content of a political action, populism often functions as a strategic tool. The literature widely acknowledges the “chameleon-like” nature of populism and its flexibility in content, shaped by and dependent on external factors. This nuance deserves careful consideration, particularly in academic discussions that prioritize definitional inquiries into the nature of populism (Wojczewski, 2024, 10). Moreover, regardless of the categorization adopted within the literature, it is difficult to speak of a fully autonomous or self-contained definition of populism.

Having discussed the concept of populism, the following section examines and evaluates the notion of right-wing populism, which constitutes the main focus of this study. In this context, its defining characteristics and ideological foundations are addressed.

1.2.Radical Right Populism

As can be seen in the different approaches and definitions, there is a fundamental political logic to the use of the term populist, however, different circumstances also lead to different types of populism. In this regard, it is not feasible to establish a standardized set of features that is applicable to all instances or political actors considered populist. Hence, one of the significant distinctions regarding the concept of populism concerns its position on the political spectrum. The most fundamental division here is made along the lines of the right and the left, with discourses and actions grounded in the ideological foundations of this framework. According to Mudde, there is a subtle yet meaningful semantic nuance that determines the analytical focus between populist radical right and radical right populism. In the phrase radical right-wing populism, the term “radical right” refers to the ideological tendencies of populism that are the main focus of analysis. This usage of the term populism encompasses specific traits linked to the “radical right” ideological perspective. Within radical right ideology, the term “radical” reflects an opposition to liberal democratic values, while “right” denotes the belief that social inequality is an inevitable feature of the natural order (Mudde, 2007, 26).

Mudde identifies three key components of radical right populism: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. These three elements provide a conceptual framework for understanding the political discourse and practices associated with right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007, 155). Mudde defines nativism as an ideology that idealizes a nation-state composed exclusively of the native population, regards foreigners as a threat to this perceived cultural and ethnic homogeneity, and therefore endorses exclusionary policies toward them

(Mudde, 2007, 138–139). Within a nativist conception of nationalism, framing migrants, minorities, or foreigners with various legal statuses as “existential threats” allows the negative connotations of racism and xenophobia to be rearticulated within the framework of radical right populism as a legitimate expression of the people’s unmet demands and unrecognized grievances (Wojczewski, 2024, 8–9). Accordingly, political discourse and practice are carried out along the axis of “our own state for our own nation”. Nevertheless, in many cases, a certain degree of ethnic diversity must be tolerated. Thus, exclusionary politics are frequently implemented implicitly or directed toward foreigners, who are criminalized and depicted as engaging in actions disruptive to the country (Mudde, 2007, 138–139). In this sense, despite their exclusionary stance toward foreigners, radical right populist parties may also display attitudes of solidarity and responsibility toward ethnic kin in other countries (Mudde, 2007, 141).

Regarding Mudde’s second defining feature, the authoritarian structure of these parties is grounded on the purported necessity of an uncompromising political mechanism to prevent vulnerability against outsiders and maintain internal order, reflecting the belief that contemporary democracies are unable to provide such stability. Nevertheless, the radical right populist parties’ strict commitment to the rule of law is not always upheld in a consistent manner. Following their rise to power, these parties frequently demand changes in the definition of crime and the penal system, often targeting internal opposition as well (Mudde, 2007, 145–146). Radical right populist parties advance a conception of plebiscitary democracy that is integrated with the leadership of a strong political figure, presumed to embody and directly transmit the will of the people into political decision-making. Within this framework, the notion of popular sovereignty is operationalized through demands to expand the authority of this central actor, thereby reducing the role of intermediary institutions and reinforcing executive concentration (Mudde, 2007, 151–155). In a similar vein, Mouffe argues that right-wing populism draws upon an exclusionary mechanism that predominantly relies on xenophobia. Accordingly, antagonism is an existential element in politics, and right-wing populist actors effectively utilize it to mobilize the public. On the other hand, the existence and rise of right-wing populism is partly attributed to the shortcomings within liberal democracy. In this context, the insufficient emphasis on popular sovereignty, one of the central themes of legitimacy in liberal democratic systems, is identified as a significant issue. Another critical point to emphasize is the inability of established parties in post-industrial societies to adequately address emerging demands, thereby making right-wing populist parties appear to offer solutions and alternatives. In particular, the necessity of collective identities and the absence of a sense of

belonging within the existing order, coupled with the intensification of alienation in society, have increased the appeal of these new alternatives (Mouffe, 2005, 53–56).

The rise of the far right in Western Europe, and its partial dominance of politics in many countries, has revived academic interest in populism studies (Jagers - Walgrave, 2007, 319). Therefore, considering radical right populism as a newly emerged phenomenon is a misconception. Although its visibility has increased in recent years, the rise of radical right populism can be traced back to the post-industrial revolution of the 1960s in Europe, which led to profound transformations (Rooduijn, 2015, 27; Betz, 1993, 663). In the post-industrial period, the inability of traditional political parties to respond to shifting demands has created opportunities on both the supply side and the demand side for the rise of radical right populism. Within this context, voters increasingly aligned themselves with new political formations, while radical right-wing populist parties effectively utilized the failures of mainstream parties and widespread societal discontent, turning these into a source of political power. Thus, it is not possible to identify a specific social base appealed to by radical right-wing parties, as the unique demands of the country's political landscape are the decisive factors in this context (Betz, 1993, 664–665, 671–672).

Right-wing populism has recently gained prominence in both political and academic spheres as a reflection of the tension caused by deepening global crises and uncertainties. The 2015 European Migrant Crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing civil wars have triggered economic, political, and social deadlocks on a global scale, thereby intensifying prevailing uncertainties. Within this socio-political climate, individuals' pursuit of security, desire to preserve their identity, and demand for economic stability have emerged as significant driving forces behind the growing support for more radical political actors (Erçetin, 2024, 223). Incidents such as terrorist attacks across Europe in 2015–2016 and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union through Brexit have served as an impetus for this surge, especially in Europe (Mudde, 2016, 25). However, the rise of radical right-wing populism has not been confined to Europe; the rise to power of figures such as Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye, and, more recently, Viktor Orbán in Hungary is often regarded as evidence of the global spread of this political trend (Gandesha, 2018, 49–50).

In light of these global developments, the case of Türkiye offers a valuable example for understanding how right-wing populism is shaped by national historical experiences and socio-political conditions. AK Party, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has emerged as a central political force during the same period that right-wing populism has been gaining

ground worldwide. Its trajectory reveals how populist strategies, narratives, and ideological patterns are shaped not only by global currents but also by long-standing domestic political traditions. The following section examines the evolution of the AK Party's populist discourse and the ideological underpinnings that sustain it. It evaluates the discursive continuity of the party during its years in power, drawing on both populist themes and enduring political legacies in Türkiye.

1.3.Discursive Continuity and Populist Legacy: The Political Discourse and Ideological Foundations of the AK Party

Until the transition to a multi-party system in 1950, the founding ideology of the Republic of Türkiye, Kemalism, was characterized by features of Turkish nationalism grounded and accompanied by a strict secularism and a statist approach in both economic and political domains. Within this framework, it has been argued that those marginalized by the official ideology were more visible than its beneficiaries. Ethnic groups not considered part of the Turkish identity, as well as religious communities adhering to diverse religions or different sects within Islam, were excluded from the system. Likewise, non-elite groups within this statist structure are claimed to have experienced various forms of social and political marginalization (Şahin, 2013, 163–164).

According to various studies, conservative populist (Arısan, 2022) and center-right populist (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022) discourses emerged in Türkiye in the 1950s with the rise of the DP (Aytaç - Elçi, 2019; Çarkoğlu et al., 2022; Arısan, 2022; Sunar, 1985). In the 1950 general elections, the founders of the Demokrat Party positioned themselves as loyal to the founding principles of the Republic, yet in opposition to the authoritarian single-party regime. The DP, which was founded by some former members of the Cumhuriyet Halk Party (CHP), initially set out with leadership drawn from the same ruling elite. Over time, however, it shifted the political focus toward the notion of the “national will” and gradually adopted a more populist use of the concept in its discourse (Sözen, 2020, 16). Sunar states that populism renders visible the demands of those excluded from the ruling class and the dominant ideology, and that the DP reversed the previous “for the people despite the people” approach, transforming its populism into a populist ideology oriented toward the demands of the masses (Sunar, 1985, 2076–2081). Aytaç and Elçi, on the other hand, explain the enabling conditions for the emergence of populism in Türkiye through Şerif Mardin's center-periphery theory. They argue that the DP functioned as a peripheral party, which allowed it to sustain consistent support from the

conservative majority. The party portrayed “the people” as the oppressed and victimized rural population and small-scale tradespeople marginalized by the ruling elites (Aytaç - Elçi, 2019, 91).

In his 1948 speech, Menderes states, “neither the rural nor the urban people has yet become the master of the country” (Bora, 2015, 334). This statement emerges as an expression of the party’s critical stance and opposition toward the established regime and tutelage. Throughout his various speeches during the 1946-1950 period, Menderes frames political rights and freedoms as guarantees of the national will, in which the national will is regarded as the basis for establishing democracy. In another speech given in 1949 in İzmir, Menderes criticizes the tutelary system’s elite-driven politics, presented as a prerequisite for “enlightened democracy,” arguing that it disregarded the national will and imposed an authoritarian and repressive regime (Bora, 2015, 334):

“With phrases such as ‘enlightened democracy,’ does it not bring to mind, with a peculiar turn of phrase, the term ‘enlightened despotism,’ implying that citizens and the Turkish nation are to be educated by the ‘enlightened ones’ and that only through this can liberty be attained? Furthermore, does the claim that democracy can only be possible and achievable through the education and discipline of the citizens and the nation not reveal that those making this claim consider themselves divinely appointed to govern the country and to discipline the nation?” (Bora, 2015, 334).

This political division also facilitated the formation of an elite group underlying the antagonism at the core of populism. The DP remained in power until the 1960 Coup. Soon after, some former DP members established the AP in 1961. For the most part, the AP preserved DP ideas and practices, thereby creating a partial continuation of the party, particularly regarding its political populism support base (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022, 331). During this period, the struggle between “the elites” and “the people” continued to be a prominent theme, shaping Turkish politics. However, “the people” came to be understood as Muslim Turks marginalized by the ruling elites, and references to the national will intensified. Meanwhile, the ruling elite, whose victimizing role and threatening presence had been concretized via the CHP in the DP discourse, had become more ambiguous during the AP era. Within this discursive framework, “them” refers to elites who oppose the national will and marginalize the people, both as individuals and institutions. The AP advocated that this “elitist mentality” had overthrown the DP and is now pursuing the same goal against the AP (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022, 332).

The party experienced a rise with the election of Süleyman Demirel as its chairman in 1964 and came to power alone in 1965, maintaining its presence in government through coalitions

during the 1970s. Shaping its political stance around the center-right, the party positioned itself within the political spectrum accordingly (“Adalet Partisi Tarihçe”). Demirel’s non-elite background and rural origins, along with his unchanged accent, contributed to his image as the “man of the people”. Conversely, these characteristics became a subject of humor for the opposition, who called him “Shepherd Sülü,” while Demirel emphasized that he came from the people he represented (Bora, 2023, 119–120):

“They say, ‘Where did you come from?’ It’s very simple; there is no need to wear glasses for this! I came out of you. My father is also a man of this land with calloused hands! I came out of this land. What are you talking about, ‘calloused hands, hardworking brother, laborer brother’? The calloused hand is here; there is no need to pretend!” (Bora, 2023, 119–120).

The AP was dissolved in 1980, along with all other contemporary parties (Aytaç - Elçi, 2019, 92). Although the Anavatan Party (ANAP) and Doğru Yol Party (DYP) emerged during this period, aligning with the ideological lineage of the two preceding parties, neither exhibited a distinctly populist presence.

In the post-1980 era, populism has most prominently been associated with the Milli Görüş Hareketi, led by Necmettin Erbakan (Aytaç - Elçi, 2019, 92–93). The ideological distinction between the center-right populism of Demirel and the AP, and the Milli Görüş populism led by Erbakan, lies in the transformation of the AP’s notion of “the people” into the Milli Görüş conception of “the nation” (millet). In Milli Görüş ideology, it is not constructed through Turkish nationalism alone but unifies a broader Muslim-ummah identity. According to Erbakan’s populist discourse, the main enemies were the AP and CHP, which were blamed for rendering Türkiye economically dependent, authoritarian, and vulnerable to external influence. Within this framework, the AP and CHP are portrayed as responsible for leaving the country defenseless, while the true enemy is framed as the “foreign powers” undermining the nation (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022, 332–333).

The Milli Görüş Movement, initiated in Türkiye’s political landscape by Necmettin Erbakan through the Milli Nizam Party (MNP) in 1970, continued its existence through various successor parties (Çaha - Baykal, 2017, 790). The MNP’s political life was short-lived. Following its dissolution in 1971, Erbakan founded the Milli Selamet Party (MSP) in 1972, thereby continuing the Milli Görüş ideological course. The MSP remained active until the 1980 Coup, which resulted in the closure of all political parties. When political parties were permitted again in 1983, the Milli Görüş continued to exist within the Refah Party (RP). In the following years, the next political representative of this tradition, the Fazilet Party (FP), established by

Milli Görüş adherents in 1997, was ultimately closed in 1998 due to claims of “actions contrary to the secular republic” (Özet, 2024, 14).

Milli Görüş, which was actively present in Turkish political life from the 1970s until the early 2000s, expressed its goal as “the spiritual and material development of our nation to achieve happiness and well-being” (Erbakan, 1975, 26). The simultaneous advancement of material and spiritual dimensions in politics was considered essential for the establishment of the “virtue order” (Fazilet nizamı).

In his book *Milli Görüş*, Erbakan states that:

“...Our nation has the determination, will, faith, and spiritual strength to make both our material and spiritual development successful. It is possible and very easy for us to become the most advanced and powerful state in the world in industry and technology by developing materially, and it is also possible and easy for us to establish an exemplary moral and virtuous order in the world by developing spiritually.” (Erbakan, 1975, 24).

In a 1995 interview broadcast on a television program *32.Gün*, Necmettin Erbakan was asked what his first action would be if his party were to come to power following the December 24 general election. He responds by stating, “First, we will address our beloved nation,” and continues as follows:

“Ey milletimiz, from today onwards, the era of governments that fought against their people, their people's faith, and their history has ended. Now you are in power, your faith is in power, and your history is in power... A great Türkiye is being rebuilt. We are freed from the reptilian life; we are being freed from troubles. This is a tremendous event...” (“Necmettin Erbakan Söyleşisi | Şeytanın Avukatı | 1995” (1995)).

Erbakan’s response can be seen as a concise summary of the Turkish right-wing populist tradition. In this statement, where anti-establishment rhetoric is visible, the concept of “the nation” is embraced as a unified whole, with its religious and historical values, conveying the message that sovereignty belongs to the people.

Following the historical development and manifestations of right-wing populist politics in Türkiye, as outlined above, the next major representative of this tradition emerged with the AK Party, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and inherited the right-wing populist manner from its predecessors. The party was founded in 2001 and came to power in the 2002 general elections (Ateş, 2017) and pursued a populist politics along the lines of the Demokrat Party and the Milli Görüş Movement (Aytaç - Elçi, 2019; Çarkoğlu et al., 2022). A considerable proportion of the

founding members of the AK Party initially entered politics through the Milli Görüş Movement. Following the dissolution of the Fazilet Party, two distinct political parties emerged. While the reformist faction continued its political trajectory under the AK Party, the traditionalist faction established the Saadet Party (SP), adopting a more conservative stance. Nevertheless, the AK Party, representing the reformist wing, explicitly asserted at its first party congress that it did not constitute a radical departure from the Refah Party-Fazilet Party tradition (Coşar - Özman, 2004, 62). Furthermore, in its 2002 electoral manifesto, the party emphasizes its “principled politics,” articulating its vision as follows: “AK Party, which seeks change within continuity, preserves diversity within unity, trusts in the dynamism of society, and aims to institutionalize a political tradition that is open-minded to global developments and innovations, is a democratic, conservative, innovative, and modern political party.” (AK Party, 2015, 9).

1.4.The AK Party and Populism: A Literature-Based Approach

The AK Party’s rise to power represents a major turning point in the trajectory of Turkish politics. It also constitutes a significant example of Islamic populism, which has increasingly gained global visibility (Yalvaç - Joseph, 2019, 786). This transformation, closely linked to the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis, brought an end to the post-September 12 regime and paved the way for the emergence of a new middle class, described as “culturally conservative, politically nationalist and partially authoritarian, and economically liberal (or more precisely, pro-free enterprise)” (Insel, 2003, 298), which found its political representation within the AK Party’s discourse of “principled politics”. As a result, the existence of a new emerging class became a significant advantage for the AK Party in the 2002 general elections. In the context of populism, this representation played a notable role in shaping a political discourse positioned in direct opposition to the post-September 12 regime’s elites. In this respect, the AK Party formed an administrative cadre that appeared modest and closely connected to the people, emphasizing a rhetoric aimed at transforming the established order. These characteristics had become particularly salient during the party’s early years in Turkish politics (Insel, 2003, 299–303). In this context, the widespread dissatisfaction caused by the policies implemented in and after the 2001 crisis facilitated the emergence of a political discourse that offers solutions to these grievances and has provided the necessary framework for populist politics, eventually helping to secure electoral success (Yalvaç - Joseph, 2019, 793).

Another crucial factor in the rise of the AK Party is its liberal-conservative approach, which characterized its politics until 2007 (Yabancı, 2016; Ateş, 2017, 115–117). The party's critical

discourse toward authoritarianism and September 12 regime elites, along with promises to change the established order and strengthen ties with the European Union (EU), has received considerable support from the liberal group. On the other hand, becoming a source of hope for economic and political stability enabled a group of small tradesmen to become party voters (Öztan, 2020). In particular, actions taken towards EU membership and the implementation of IMF programs led liberal groups to attribute a democratizing role to the party (Akçay, 2019, 55).

In the early years of the AK Party's rule, neoliberal policies such as labor market reforms, privatization, and fiscal discipline played a central role in shaping the economy (Akçay, 2019, 48–49). On the other hand, the persistence of the neoliberal model, which had already been a source of social discontent, was balanced through social and financial support mechanisms. Although some studies interpret the AK Party's populist discourse and practices primarily through these mechanisms, other analyses go beyond ensuring consent and emphasize the central role of religious identity construction in the party's populism. From this perspective, it is possible to characterize the AK Party's populist orientation as a form of "Islamic populism" or "religious populism". Therefore, the party's political stance, discourse, and actions adopted in its initial years projected a liberal-conservative image (Ateş, 2017).

Studies on populism generally suggest that populism in Türkiye utilizes basic concepts such as *the people* and *national will*, claiming that these concepts are often hidden in the language used by political actors. Building on this understanding, it is observed that the party gradually distanced itself from the moderate and inclusive elements it initially incorporated into its discourse. At the outset, the party collaborated with the liberal segment to marginalize and significantly weaken the Kemalist secular elites. Over time, however, it distanced itself considerably from the liberal segment as well. Furthermore, initial favorable stances and commitments concerning relations with the European Union gradually transformed into an anti-Western discourse, accompanied by a substantial increase in the use of explicitly religious expressions. Accordingly, the notion of "the people" in AK Party politics has increasingly been constructed around a Muslim identity, fostering the perception that the Muslim Turkish population possesses a moral superiority over the West's perceived immorality. As the discourse evolved, the West came to be framed within the discourse as both an enemy and a threat, allegedly seeking to undermine Türkiye's progress and power (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2019, 7–9; Bacik - Seker, 2023, 11). Indeed, it is argued that the AK Party's populist discourse has intensified, particularly after the 2010 referendum, and that its conception of "us" is grounded in a Turkish-Islamic identity (Bulut - Hacıoğlu, 2018, 192–195).

The post-2010 period has witnessed a clear consolidation of religious populism. However, before 2007, the AK Party still maintained a liberal-conservative identity and contributed to the formation of a more moderate political environment until the 2007 general elections. In that election, the party significantly increased its share of votes. Following this victory, a gradual shift in its political stance became evident, leading to a more explicit use of the label “populist” in the academic literature (Ateş, 2017). In this context, Sunni-Muslim identity became one of the key components in conceptualizing the “us versus them” dichotomy, both on a national and international level, serving as a defining marker of the legitimate people shaped by the notion of national will (Ateş, 2017, 117–119).

In Turkish political history, the critique of military tutelage and the emphasis on the national will, initially articulated by Adnan Menderes and the Demokrat Party in the 1950s and later by Süleyman Demirel (AP) and Turgut Özal (ANAP) after 1960, were subsequently adopted by the AK Party (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022, 335–336; Öztan, 2020). Erdoğan’s speech at the TBMM Group Meeting on May 16, 2007, clearly demonstrates his alignment with the right-wing populist tradition widely recognized as having been initiated by the DP in Türkiye:

“It is clearly understood that what is truly intolerable is the national will, the people have a voice. When the transition to a multi-party system occurred, those who declared 'Enough, the nation shall speak!' came to power with great momentum, alongside Menderes. Now recall what we said on November 3. First came the process of 'Enough, the nation shall speak!' and now we say 'Enough, the decision belongs to the nation,' and we have continued on this path. This is what we are saying now: Enough, the decision belongs to the nation! We will go to the people. In the presidential elections as well as in the general parliamentary elections...” (“Erdoğan: Demokrasinin Ağırlığını Taşımak Bizim İçin Onurdur” (2007)).

The 2007 presidential election crisis, centered on the 367-vote requirement, along with the Republic Protests and the 2008 AK Party closure trial, represents a critical turning point in Turkish politics. These developments have provided a significant political platform for the AK Party to consolidate its legitimacy around the supremacy of the national will and to present itself as the sole representative of that will (Çarkoğlu et al., 2022, 335–336; Öztan, 2020). In the 2007 presidential election, Abdullah Gül was nominated by AK Party leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and received 357 votes in parliament. The results prompted an objection from the CHP, citing the constitutional requirement of 367 votes to elect the president. Despite this objection, Gül was elected president with 339 votes in the third round of voting held on 8 August 2007. Following the political crisis and the debate surrounding the “367” threshold, a referendum was held to amend the constitution, introducing the direct election of the president by popular vote. Moreover, the Balyoz and Ergenekon conspiracy trials, alongside allegations of a coup plot

against the government, reinforced a perception of a threat toward the democratically elected administration, thereby providing fertile ground for the political leadership to consolidate its legitimacy through populist discourse (Kayiral, 2025, 22–23). In light of these developments, the idea of the national will remains closely linked to the party’s construction of “the people” as its primary subject. This association reinforces a collective sense of “us” in the face of perceived threats and paves the way for a populist strategy of hegemony.

During the AK Party’s first term in office, its promises to restructure the September 12 regime came to the forefront in 2010 through a constitutional referendum, which marked both a critical and controversial moment in Türkiye’s democratic trajectory. The Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan encouraged the public to vote “Yes,” framing the referendum as a “confrontation with the tutelary stance” and a means of preventing further interruptions to democracy, while accusing the main opposition party, the CHP, of upholding such a tutelary stance. Opponents of the referendum, positioned on the “No” side of the campaign, arguing that the true objective of the constitutional amendments was to bring the judiciary under the control of the AK Party. In addition to the CHP, the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli also opposed the constitutional changes, characterizing them as a “foreign imposition” and a “party constitution”. Therefore, Bahçeli publicly supported the “No” side of the campaign (“2010 Referandumı: ‘Evet’, ‘Hayır’ ve ‘Boykot’ Cepheleri Ne Demişti?” (2017)). The 2010 referendum has also become subject to academic debates within the framework of democratization versus authoritarianism. Whereas some view the proposal as an attempt to eliminate remnants of Kemalist authoritarianism, others interpret it as a step toward weakening the separation of powers (Taşcıoğlu, 2024, 155).

The constitutional amendment, approved by 57.88% of the voters, followed by the 2011 general elections in which the AK Party received 49.8% of the votes and attained 326 seats in parliament (“2011 Genel Seçimi Sonuçları” (2011)), is interpreted as an indication of the establishment of a single-party government independent from military and judicial tutelage, which subsequently became increasingly authoritarian (Yalvaç - Joseph, 2019; Çarkoğlu et al., 2022; Öztan, 2020). The significance of this development in the context of populism lies in the evolution of how the source of national will, the people, has come to be defined primarily by the group supporting the “Yes” vote during the 2010 referendum campaigns, effectively excluding “No” voters and boycott supporters from this category. This exclusion has led various populism studies to regard 2010 as a turning point in Türkiye, defining the ruling party’s politics as populist but increasingly authoritarian (Yalvaç - Joseph, 2019; Çarkoğlu et al., 2022; Öztan, 2020).

With the 2013 Gezi Park events, the AK Party's repressive discourse and actions against opposition groups have intensified, while the population was discursively excluded from the category of "pure people" and gradually expanded to encompass a broader group of society. In 2012, citizens and some political actors initiated several campaigns against the privatization of Gezi Park, a part of the AK Party government's urban transformation project, which has become the focus of controversy. After the project's public procurement, a group of citizens attempted to prevent the logging in Gezi Park through peaceful resistance on May 27, 2013 (Erkmen, 2025, 207–211). The existing dissatisfaction and grievances caused by authoritarian tendencies in politics brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds during the Gezi protests, particularly in response to the police's disproportionate use of force. What began as a peaceful effort to prevent the logging quickly evolved into a mass protest articulating broader demands for democracy, civil liberties, and resistance to authoritarianism (Ateş, 2017). However, these demands were not met at the political level and were instead perceived as a threat. Various labels that marginalize and exclude protesters began to be frequently used in political discourse. During the "Respect for National Will" rallies, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the Gezi Park movement as a "treacherous attack" and a "conspiracy" intended to overthrow the government. The movement was also associated with past events, such as the September 12 Coup and the February 28 process, although it was emphasized that the nation had overcome these challenges as well.

"As a nation, we have such a resistance that suppresses all uprisings, foils all ruses, and overturn all traps. We resist with prayers and supplications, by remaining silent, enduring patiently, saying 'Let us see what the god does, whatever he does, he does it well' but they do not understand this" ("Gezi Parkı'nı Terk Edin" Çağrısı" (2013)).

The Gezi protests not only impacted the period in which they occurred but also led to an intensification of repression against protesters and came to be framed as another enemy identity within AK Party politics.

Following the Gezi Park protests, the corruption investigations of December 17-25, 2013, plunged Türkiye into a turbulent period characterized by deepening political polarization, increasing repression, and enhanced state control. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regarded the operations as a political plot targeting the government and the Turkish economy, assigning responsibility to the Gülen movement, which he referred to as the "parallel state". At that time, any critical or oppositional attitude toward the government was easily labeled as "traitorous". Subsequent to the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, media censorship began to intensify, and the state of emergency remained in place for an extended period. As the

perception of threat became more ambiguous and the boundaries of the enemy less defined, this period gave rise not only to deep political polarization but also to a widespread atmosphere of fear and distrust among the public (Sawae, 2020). Especially in the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt, the crisis environment that the country was in led to an increase in the discourse on internal and external enemies and maintained polarization. It is argued that the AK Party consolidated its power by pitting the people against corrupt elites and using rhetoric to target the country's internal and external enemies, which the AK Party identified through the Islamist-secularist divide (Yabanci, 2016, 591–595).

Following the failed coup attempt of July 15, the 2017 constitutional referendum was held under state of emergency (OHAL) conditions. This referendum, which fundamentally transformed the structure of the Turkish state, brought the transition to a “presidential system” to the forefront and triggered a new polarization in society between “Yes” and “No” camps. The referendum was not merely perceived as a procedural alteration of the governance model but extensively debated in the public sphere as a choice between a “strong state” and a “one-man regime” (Kayiral, 2025, 25–26). The impacts of the July 15 coup attempt were evident in both the legitimization of the regime change and the criminalization of the “No” camp through associations with terrorist organizations. The “Yes” camp, known as the “People’s Bloc,” venerates the people as the collective force that resisted the coup, with references to July 15 to frame the people as guarantors of national stability, prosperity, and security (Erçetin, 2024, 217–218). Since the “Yes” supporters believed that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the only political actor capable of delivering these goals, it was left to the people to pave the way for his direct authorization. Thus, the referendum became not only a change in the governance model but also a process of institutionalization of Erdoğan's personalized leadership, while both the “Yes” and “No” propaganda relied heavily on mobilizing public perceptions of his personality (Erçetin, 2024, 216; Gözler, 2017).

In the AK Party’s political agenda, the “Yes” campaign for the 2017 referendum was fueled by the discourses mentioned earlier, which created a significant moral pressure on voters who would vote for “No” (Gözler, 2017). The framing of the “No” campaign as colluding with terrorism and treason created an atmosphere of distrust toward dissenting voices and served as a source of apprehension. Erçetin characterizes this climate as a “narrative of fear” (Erçetin, 2024, 216–217). Because the AK Party constructed its discourse against the “No” side, which was based on the perceived cooperation with terrorism and betrayal, it created an insecure environment for the opposition and became a source of reservation. The presidential election on June 24, 2018, campaigns and speeches also followed a similar line to 2017. During the 2018

presidential election campaigns, the visit of Muharrem İnce, a candidate from the main opposition CHP, to the imprisoned Halkların Demokratik Party (HDP) presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş triggered a significant development in the continuation of this line. Thus, the AK Party centred the concepts that emphasize the security of the state and the nation in its election campaigns (Erçetin, 2024, 217–218). The 2018 election resulted in the victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, receiving 52.59% of the votes nationwide in Türkiye (“Cumhurbaşkanı Seçimi ve 27. Dönem Milletvekili Genel Seçimi” (2018)).

In his speech at the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) Group Meeting on March 20, 2018, President Erdoğan emphasizes the significance of the 2019 local elections in the context of realizing the vision of a “Great and Strong Türkiye,” stating, “Whoever walks this path with our nation, secures a place in Great Türkiye”. Beyond framing the local elections as a matter of political competition, Erdoğan also portrays them as a critical issue concerning “the perpetuity of the nation and the state” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’ın 20 Mart 2018 Tarihinde TBMM Grup Toplantisi’nda Yaptığı Konuşması” (2018)). In this context, he evokes the possibility of a bleak future in the event of an opposition victory, presenting the elections as a decisive moment not only for political power transitions but also for national unity and stability.

The 2019 Turkish local elections represent a significant development in the country’s political landscape, particularly with the election of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the opposition CHP candidate, as mayor of the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality. This outcome has challenged the prevailing narrative of the AK Party’s electoral dominance. During the elections, the political spotlight was centered on İstanbul, where İmamoğlu’s slight advantage in the initial vote led to objections and the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) ultimately invalidated the results. In the repeat election held in June 2019, İmamoğlu won with 54.2% of the vote, representing a substantial challenge to the ruling party’s entrenched control of municipal administration (Sanver Saydan, 2021, 1–2; Demiralp - Balta, 2021, 8–10).

By the time Türkiye approached the 2023 General Elections, the country had entered a new phase characterized by the consolidation of alliance-based politics. Following legal amendments that facilitated such alignments, election campaigns and political competition were primarily conducted between two major alliances. In this context, the AK Party and the MHP united under the name of the Cumhur İttifakı (People’s Alliance), while the CHP, the İYİ Party, the DP, and the Saadet Party came together to form the Millet İttifakı (Nation Alliance). Although the People’s Alliance emerged victorious from the elections, the division between the two blocs contributed to a significant polarization within society, effectively deepening an

almost even split among the electorate (Sanver Saydan, 2021, 1–2; Demiralp - Balta, 2021, 8–10). Consequently, in line with the political atmosphere shaped by the 2023 elections, the populist discourse, rooted in a binary opposition of “us versus them” and cultivated by the AKP since its founding in 2001, evolved into a new form, now framed through the dichotomy of “the people” (Cumhur) and “the nation” (Millet).

1.5.Chapter Conclusion

This section aims to examine the defining features of populism and right-wing populism within a conceptual framework, drawing attention to their flexible ideological alignments and discursive patterns. Indeed, Taggart emphasizes the flexibility of populism, noting that “the chameleonic nature of populism means that there are some features that are clearly a product of the context, of the period, and of the place” (Taggart, 2000, 59). The existing literature demonstrates that populism does not constitute a grounded ideology itself; however, it can be easily articulated with one or even more. In the context of right-wing populism, the literature highlights a discourse that reinforces various binaries through cultural perceptions of fear, while emphasizing local identity and traditional values. This discourse is often framed around perceived or potential threats to national unity and homogeneity. Accordingly, a populist notion of social unity is constructed by excluding those deemed to be “them”. In this regard, drawing on theoretical debates, this study aims to evaluate the AK Party’s populist approach by analyzing both its constituent elements and its evolution over time, seeking a more comprehensive understanding of its political discourse.

In the Turkish context, the AK Party’s populist trajectory is not a standalone development; instead, it reflects a continuation of a wider political legacy. The populist discourse initiated by the DP and later shaped by the AP, as well as the Milli Görüş Movement led by Necmettin Erbakan, is examined. The study also aims to assess how the AK Party draws upon this populist tradition and how it has evolved this legacy over time. Accordingly, the AK Party’s populism is positioned as a political practice that carries traces of the past while being reshaped by contemporary dynamics. The roots of this discourse can be traced back to the era of the DP, which promoted a political language that prioritized the “national will” and stood in opposition to elitist and bureaucratic structures. Over time, this discourse became increasingly intertwined with religious and cultural identity. While the AK Party embraces this tradition, it has also adapted and reinterpreted it in response to existing conditions. Based on the discussions presented in this section, it may be contended that the AK Party government presents a set of

features similar to right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, but the use of populist elements fluctuates among periods and conditions (Mudde, 2017).

Since its establishment, the AK Party has been approached and analyzed from various perspectives within the populism literature. This diversity primarily stems from the party's capacity to adapt its discourse contingently, in relation to both domestic and foreign political contexts. Indeed, the moderate policies pursued during the party's initial period in power raise the question of whether it can be characterized as populist in its early years. However, despite the inclusive tone of its rhetoric and promises during this phase, the party simultaneously produced a populist antagonism between "the people" and "the elite," generating a divisive enemy figure that posed significant challenges to Türkiye. It is evident that the AK Party's initial period in power followed a pattern closely aligned with the core elements of populism. Although in subsequent years the definition of the "acceptable citizen" narrowed and the spectrum of "them" diversified, the early rhetoric of the AK Party primarily positioned the "pure people" in opposition to the elites who were portrayed as disconnected and indifferent to the people's predicament (Ateş, 2017; Yabancı, 2016). When considering the most fundamental definitions of populism, it is clear that the AK Party's early term falls within a populist framework:

"a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde - Kaltwasser, 2017, 6).

Under these circumstances, it is neither possible nor sufficient to propose a fixed concept of populism that consistently explains the AK Party's populist stance and the underlying elements shaping its discourse from its early days to the present. However, a general assessment reveals that terms such as right-wing or radical right-wing populism, Islamic populism, civilizational populism, and authoritarian populism are frequently used in the literature to characterize the AK Party and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's politics. On the other hand, there seems to be a consensus that the AK Party government has been adopting a more populist approach while simultaneously becoming more authoritarian. Within the scope of this transformation, religious references, initially used more implicitly, have gradually become an integral part of the AK Party's discourse. As the party consolidated its power through political developments, it reached a point where it could maintain its rule without adopting inclusive policies, while

simultaneously marginalizing opposition groups by excluding them from the boundaries of national identity.

The developments briefly discussed above, which have had significant impacts on Turkish political life, illustrate how the perception of who constitutes the “pure people” and the national identity has gradually narrowed, leading to an increasingly polarized political and social environment. Within this process, the populist distinction between “us versus them” has become a core foundation of the party’s political legitimacy. The rise of both internal and external enemies has facilitated the continuous reproduction and reinforcement of the populist discourse.



CHAPTER 2. MIGRATION, RIGHT-WING POPULISM, AND TÜRKİYE

This chapter aims to initiate a discussion on migration not merely as individual mobility, but as a multifaceted social phenomenon that is shaped by and continually redefined within various political, economic, and social contexts. Acknowledging that how migration is interpreted directly affects how migrants are defined, categorized, and addressed through policies, the commonly employed voluntary-forced dichotomy, legal categories, and push-pull models in migration studies are critically examined. The first topic of discussion focuses on how approaches that consider migration solely through the framework of individual choice or necessity render invisible the structural inequalities and intersectional factors influencing migrants' decision-making processes.

In this regard, migration is examined not merely as a process of spatial relocation but as one in which identities, statuses, and social roles are continuously reconstructed. It is emphasized that migrant identity is produced not through legal categories but through discourses, constituting a social position that is continuously redefined in accordance with political, economic, and cultural contexts. Focusing on the politicization and securitization of migration, the discussion evaluates how migrants are framed as threats, sources of crisis, or economic burdens in different contexts, and which political objectives these framings serve. The instrumentalization of migration at the discursive and policy levels is analyzed in relation to the observation that the figure of the migrants becomes a continuously reproduced political subject.

Another focal point of this section is how migration discourses and policies complement or contradict each other. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that discourse is not merely a conceptual construct but a tool that regulates social relations, shapes policy formulation, and guides implementation processes. In this context, the discussion evaluates which policies are legitimized by the discourses developed about migrants, and conversely, how the implemented policies redefine the figure of the migrant in the social sphere. The reciprocal relationship between discourses and practices in the politicization of migration is constituted as one of the main axes of this section's discussion.

Within this general framework of discussion, the final part of the section focuses on the case of Türkiye by evaluating how the phenomenon of migration has been conceptualized during the AK Party era, how migrant identities have been constructed, and which policies have been

implemented to manage migration. The discourse and policies directed at migrants in Türkiye are examined in comparison to the exclusionary, anti-migration approaches of right-wing populist movements in Western Europe, highlighting both points of divergence and convergence. A central topic of discussion is whether the inclusive discourse developed during the AK Party period, rooted in religious and cultural references, can be seen as a normative form of inclusivity or rather functions as a strategic political tool adapted to contextual conditions. By assessing areas of congruence and tension between discourse and practice, the section analyzes the strategic priorities set by the AK Party in migration governance, the social positions assigned to migrants, and the type of migration regime constructed.

Thus, this section addresses the phenomenon of migration not merely as a demographic movement but as a social issue constructed through discourses, policies, and power relations, exemplified within the specific context of Türkiye. The instrumentalization of the migrant figure in various contexts and the intertwinement of migration policies with these discursive construction processes form the core of the analysis.

2.1. Theoretical Discussions on Migration and Its Classification

Migration can be more comprehensively understood when conceptualized as a long-term and multifaceted process that generates complex and layered effects at both the individual and societal levels. Rather than constituting a mere act of spatial mobility or a personal decision driven by the pursuit of improved living conditions, migration entails a far-reaching transformation that unfolds over time and extends its impact across generations. This process not only has an impact on migrants themselves but also induces significant socio-economic and political shifts in both the origin and destination societies (Castles et al., 2014, 25). In considering migration as a system of multilayered and transnational relationships embedded within and across the territorial boundaries of multiple states, migration encompasses more than the movement of people; it entails long-term and reciprocal interactions among migrants who move to host communities and those who stay in the place of origin. These interactions span economic, political, cultural, and demographic domains. From this perspective, migration emerges as a dynamic and relational social phenomenon (Schiller, 2013, 30).

In its broadest sense, migration is defined as the movement of individuals or groups either across international borders or within the territorial boundaries of a state. Regardless of the duration, cause, or form of this movement, it may occur either voluntarily or involuntarily. This

definition refers to refugees, internally displaced persons, individuals migrating for economic reasons, and those relocating for purposes such as family reunification (Perruchoud - Redpath - Cross, 2019, 35–36). Similarly, academic literature often classifies migration through this voluntary-forced dichotomy.

Building on this general definition, an important analytical distinction concerns the manner in which individuals make migration decisions. Forced migration refers to the involuntary movement of individuals or groups who are compelled to leave their place of residence due to life-threatening circumstances such as war, internal conflict, political persecution, ethnic cleansing, natural disasters, or economic collapse. In such cases, individuals are faced with displacement either as a means of survival or to protect their fundamental rights (UNCHR, 2023, 4). By contrast, voluntary migration is typically defined as the movement of individuals with partial volition to relocate, seeking better economic opportunities, educational prospects, or more favourable living conditions. However, it is essential to note that the notion of “voluntariness” is itself fluid and contested. Indeed, migration decisions are rarely entirely free choices; instead, they are often shaped by underlying structural conditions. Indirectly coercive factors, such as inequality, income disparity, unemployment, and development disparities, can play a significant and determining role in shaping these decisions (Bakewell, 2010, 1691).

This tendency to categorize migration through a binary approach, particularly as voluntary or forced, is often regarded as a reflection of legal and bureaucratic processes. Indeed, it is argued that the complex and multilayered motives underlying migration are frequently obscured by the dominant legal and administrative frameworks through which migration is interpreted. A significant portion of existing empirical studies primarily focus on the “forced” side of this dichotomy, emphasizing displacement caused by conflict, violence, and persecution. This focus often renders the intermediate forms and complex interactions along the voluntary-forced spectrum relatively invisible, while neglecting the broader identity-related structural conditions that shape individuals’ desire to migrate, decision-making processes, and mobility (de Haas, 2011, 7). Thus, while theoretical frameworks in the literature tend to reiterate the binary classification, empirical research predominantly concentrates on the phenomenon of forced migration.

The approaches mentioned above are prone to oversimplifying migration by framing it predominantly as a reaction to push and pull factors. Such models have been criticized for adopting a static perspective in that they commonly overlook migrants’ agency and portray individuals not as active participants capable of shaping or resisting structural conditions but as passive subjects. Moreover, these frameworks do not adequately conceptualize migration as a

dynamic and processual phenomenon, thereby limiting a more nuanced understanding of mobility (de Haas, 2011, 8).

From this perspective, the way migration is defined both as a phenomenon and as physical mobility plays a crucial role in shaping both the clarity of analysis and the political effectiveness of migration discourse. The established voluntary-forced dichotomy in the literature narrows both theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses, limiting the ability of migration studies to reflect the multidimensional nature of migration dynamics. This limitation distances migration studies from accurately capturing the complexity of migration processes, thereby opening up a broader debate that considers the conceptual depth of both public and academic discourse. As a result, debates that are structured around this binary framework are susceptible to normative judgments rather than offering meaningful explanations of real-life conditions (Crawley - Skleparis, 2018, 48–49; Bakewell, 2010, 1690).

The legal status and treatment of migrants who cross international borders vary significantly depending on the political context. In cases of forced cross-border migration, individuals often experience significant differences in both legal recognition and the responses they encounter. Even though the refugee status gives people protection under international law, those who migrate through irregular means are frequently criminalized. In the context of forced cross-border migration, migrants' legal status and the treatment they receive exhibit significant variations as well (Bakewell, 2010, 1690). In the literature, it is emphasized that the categories used to define migrants are not only framed within legal or administrative contexts but also carry political meanings. In this regard, terms such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” and “irregular migrant” are noted to be employed by various actors for different purposes, becoming influential tools in shaping public policies. The instrumentalization of these categories is highlighted as a factor that frames migration not merely as a humanitarian issue but also as a political matter. Therefore, it is argued that the discourse and classification used to define migrants do not occupy a neutral ground but rather a politicized one (Crawley - Skleparis, 2018, 48–49). Consequently, enhancing the comprehensibility of the current discourse on migration and migrants, and overcoming conceptual ambiguity, appears to be more feasible through the recognition of migration's dynamics as an intersectional and context-dependent phenomenon rather than relying on reductive categorization.

Discourses on migration are thus considered deeply intertwined and closely tied with power relations. From this perspective, the established categories concerning migration and migrants have the potential to legitimize certain groups while excluding many others through legal and bureaucratic practices. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the politically charged

terms frequently emphasized in international legal frameworks, such as “refugee” or “illegal migrant” (Freedman, 2016, 19). This tendency leads to superficial analyses in the academic era as well as the emergence of misleading issues in policies that directly affect migrants’ lives. Therefore, it appears essential to approach migration not merely as a form of physical relocation but as a fluid process in which an individual’s identity, status, and social roles are continually reshaped (Sheller, 2018, 39). Accordingly, rather than explaining migration through fixed categories, understanding it within a transformation-oriented framework allows for a more nuanced grasp of both the meaning of migration and the discourse that emerges from it.

With this acknowledgment, building upon the view that individuals are positioned not only through singular identity categories but also at the intersection of multiple axes such as gender, ethnicity, class, citizenship status, and age (Crenshaw, 1991, 1244), it is vital to focus on the formation of migrants’ identities based on these intersecting dimensions. As noted above, migrant experiences and their corresponding discursive representations are invariably shaped within specific socio-political contexts. Consequently, the same migrant identity may assume different meanings across different countries or historical periods. While certain states perceive migrants as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, others construct them as potential threats (Freedman, 2016, 22). Therefore, it is not appropriate to evaluate any discourse on migration independently of the political, legal, and cultural dynamics of the context in which it is produced. Migration studies need to move beyond reductive frameworks and reconfigure the migrant through dynamic, intersectional, and contextual approaches. Indeed, contextual and intersectional analyses of migration provide a critical foundation for understanding how migration is politicized as a subject of political agency by various actors. At this point, it becomes increasingly important to discuss how migration is shaped not only by individual experiences but also through political decisions and discourses.

2.2. The Politicization of Migration: Discursive Construction of Meaning

The notion of migration has significant potential to become strategically politicized within essential domains, such as security, economy, and culture. The perceptions of migrants by states and societies are also shaped across multiple dimensions. On the one hand, migrants are regarded as a vital source for sustaining the labor force and economic productivity; conversely, they are often marginalized by host societies through an emphasis on cultural integration challenges or security threats. This paradoxical process highlights how migration occupies a

central role in political competition, identity politics, and ideological polarization (Huysmans, 2006, 50).

Politicization refers not only to the process through which a social issue gains public attention but also to its transformation into a site of political contestation, as it generates opposing viewpoints and prompts actors to take distinct positions (van der Brug, 2015, 5). In this process, the issue moves beyond a private sphere and explicitly becomes an object of contestation centered around collective values, interests, and identities. As public visibility of the issue increases, previously latent tensions surface, and the subject of debate is drawn into the transformative dynamics of politics (van der Brug, 2015, 5). Such a definition conceptualizes politicization through the dual axis of polarization and salience, emphasizing that politics is not merely about differences in opinion but also about how such divergences gain visibility and lead to a reconfiguration of political positions among actors.

Anchored in the theoretical understanding above, the absence of both polarization and salience is considered a key indicator that an issue has not been politicized. An issue would be regarded as unpoliticized if, despite clearly constituting a problem, it does not give rise to public debate or platforms where opposing views can be openly expressed. Therefore, the politicization of an issue depends not only on public awareness but also significantly on how political actors approach, frame, and engage with the matter. In other words, politicization is not simply the existence of a condition, but the process by which that condition becomes a subject of political debate and contestation (İçduygu, 2017, 32).

The politicization of migration refers to the process by which the humanitarian, economic, or social aspects of migration are disregarded and framed primarily within political contexts such as “domestic political dynamics, foreign policy approaches, and national security strategies”. In this context, the politicization of migration refers to the process through which international migration movements become a decisive or influential factor in states’ domestic politics, bilateral and regional relations, and national security policies. Accordingly, migration is instrumentalized in political debates, associated with security concerns, and treated as a strategic element within policymaking processes. Throughout this process, migration becomes the subject of electoral campaigns, a tool in diplomatic relations, or a source of national security threats (Castles - Miller, 2008, 31). In destination countries, politicization is often shaped by societal reactions, specifically grassroots opposition that develops from the bottom up. Factors such as economic crises, unemployment, and identity debates tend to trigger this process. Although the benefits of migration are evident, groups adversely affected by it are likely to

encourage this politicization (İçduygu, 2017, 34). It is observed that following the 1973 Oil Crisis, irregular migration to industrialized countries increased, and from the mid-1980s onwards, the rise in refugee and asylum applications has led to migration becoming a target of far-right political movements (Castles - Miller, 2008, 167). A notable example of the politicization of migration in Türkiye is the issue of Syrian migrants. In Türkiye, the issue has been driven by several factors, such as Türkiye's status as one of the leading migrant-hosting countries, the lack of large-scale returns, increased irregular crossings to Europe, and the growing public perception of Syrians as a source of economic and social challenges (Deniz - Aksu Kargın, 2023, 217).

Two dominant perspectives on migration control are commonly associated with the broader process of politicization. On one hand, there is an emphasis on intensifying restrictive measures, while on the other, attention is drawn to the structural inequalities underlying migration, particularly the Global South and Global North divide. In this regard, the increasing rigidity of migration control regimes through measures such as border security, visa policies, document checks, and punitive regulations since the 1990s is highlighted as a key factor that has reinforced the politicization of migration (Castles - Miller, 2008, 167–168). These developments have paved the way for migration to become not only a humanitarian or economic phenomenon, but also directly associated with the security policies of states. The process of securitization of migration has become more visible in the domestic and foreign policy agendas of states and has begun to be addressed with the discourse of public order, border control, and national interests. Such practices have led to migration being addressed not only as an administrative or legal issue, but also in the context of national security. Especially in the post-Cold War period, with the transformation of the concept of security, migration has increasingly been considered a strategic and political issue. In the post-Soviet era, states' understanding of security has changed drastically, and it is claimed that military threats have been replaced by “new security threats” such as transnational problems, irregular migration, terrorism, epidemics, and environmental disasters. Accordingly, migrants were placed at the center of this security paradigm, and migration started to be associated with topics such as crime, terrorism, and radicalism (Bigo, 2002, 64–65). In this context, migrants have increasingly been portrayed as “dangerous others”, rendering them subjects of securitization in both political rhetoric and concrete policy measures (Huysmans, 2006, 50). The concept of securitizing migration offers a valuable theoretical framework in this context, suggesting that framing migrants not merely as

economic or social actors, but as threats to national integrity, enables the legitimization of extraordinary measures in the eyes of the public (Huysmans, 2006, 48).

The second critical dimension in the politicization of migration becomes evident through economic discourses that position migrants within a structural paradox, in which they are simultaneously valued for their contribution to economic growth and perceived as sources of socioeconomic pressure. While they are regarded as a driving force contributing to economic growth by addressing labor shortages, they are also perceived as a threat, exerting pressure on social welfare systems, increasing unemployment rates, and intensifying competition through “cheap labor” (Castles et al., 2014, 32). This contradictory perception demonstrates that the framing of migrants as economic agents is fundamentally ideological and selective in nature.

In this regard, the demarcation of “good and bad migrants” elucidates how neoliberalism has permeated contemporary migration policies (Sijstermans - Favero, 2025, 191). Indeed, one of the most profound and enduring impacts of the politicization of migration is evident in the cultural discourse. Particularly following the events of September 11, anti-migrant sentiments intertwined with Islamophobic rhetoric have evolved into a “us versus them” dichotomy constructed around cultural cohesion, national values, and lifestyle (Wodak, 2015). This distinction has led to increased pressures on migrants to achieve not only physical but also cultural “integration”. Within this framework, the dominant discourse associated with right-wing populism typically portrays migrants as subjects who are “difficult to assimilate,” “linked to crime,” “allegedly threatening women's rights,” and “purportedly demanding Sharia law,” thereby placing cultural adaptation issues at the core of their political agendas. Such discourses frame cultural difference as a threat and position migrants as potential outsiders within society (El-Tayeb, 2011, 116–118).

From this perspective, the figure of the migrant becomes one of the most dynamic, contested, and heavily signified subjects within modern political discourse. Depending on the historical context, ideological conjunctures, and political demands, migrants are alternately constructed as victims or threats; simultaneously, they are either conceived as valuable sources of labor or as marginalized cultural others, excluded from the dominant social fabric. As elaborated in the preceding section, migration is conceptualized not merely as a legal or social status but as a form of sociality characterized by intersections that are reconstructed through political representations. The different meanings attributed to migrants in political discourse are regarded as key factors influencing both government migration policies and public attitudes toward migrants (De Genova, 2002, 420). As widely emphasized in the literature, in the

aftermath of the refugee crises following World War II, migrants have increasingly been represented in association with humanitarian assistance. Within this framework, the migrant is portrayed as a victim of war, poverty, or persecution, and consequently legitimized through a humanitarian discourse (Chimni, 2000, 243–245). As previously discussed, the international migration regime further reinforces the construction of the migrant as a passive subject based on this figure. However, this approach results in positioning migrants not as citizens, but as objects of aid in need of assistance.

2.3. The Migrant Figure on the Axis of Right-Wing Populism

Since the 1990s, the figure of the migrant has increasingly been perceived as a threat within the realm of security (Bigo, 2002, 63). Particularly, right-wing populist discourses frame migrants as criminals, economic burdens, and threats. As De Genevo (2002) points out, migration is now identified not only with legal status but also with the potential for illegality. This situation enables the criminalization of migrants and the institutionalization of social exclusion. Consequently, the exclusion of particularly “unskilled” migrants is further legitimized, thereby reproducing inequalities. In this context, a hierarchical distinction is made among migrants based on their perceived usefulness or lack thereof, thereby structuring valuation of migrant status along market logic (Anderson, 2013, 58).

On the other hand, migration is discursively and politically framed as “illegal” within the European security complex and associated with criminal activities and security threats. This framework portrays migrants as a potential security threat to Europe. It is argued that securitization discourses not only redefine migration as a security-centered issue but also legitimize policies aimed at preventing and controlling migrants’ crossing. Consequently, surveillance and exclusionary practices are routinized within and beyond the EU borders, transforming into institutionalized practices. Furthermore, symbolically, these policies serve to define migrants as threats existing outside legal and normative frameworks. Indeed, it is noted that the logic of securitization exists in structural tension with the EU’s normative obligations based on human rights (Karamanidou, 2014, 56).

In this sense, it is important to highlight that there are clear structural connections between the European Union’s securitization processes and contemporary right-wing populist anti-migrant attitudes. EU security policies constantly construct migration as a threat both at the institutional level and by populist political actors, reflecting a pattern consistent with right-wing

populist discourse. Building upon this connection, anti-migrant right-wing populist discourse also appears to be closely related to the EU's longstanding security-oriented institutional structures. These security discourses are emphasized to have extended beyond the border policies of the EU, shaped and reinforced by the rise of xenophobia and anti-migrant societal reactions across Western Europe during the 1980s and early 1990s. This environment created fertile ground for the rise of radical right-wing populist parties, which not only placed anti-migrant sentiment at the core of their rhetoric but also distinguished themselves through strategies aimed at legitimizing this opposition (Betz, 1994, 106).

As discussed in the first chapter, the conceptual core of populism is based on the moral dichotomy that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the “people” and the “elites” (Mudde, 2007, 23). Within this conceptualization, the figure of the migrant is positioned outside this “homogenized people”. The antagonism in populist discourse thus extends into a “people-versus-migrants” divide. Anti-migration stances play a significant role in the political programs of radical right-wing parties, particularly in Western Europe (Betz, 1994, 69–71).

Accordingly, the success of right-wing populist discourse is sometimes explained through the concept of “the management of political fears” (Wodak, 2015). The resurgence of right-wing populism, nationalism, and nativist ideologies in Europe and beyond has significantly influenced public debates, particularly through discourses that portray certain groups as marginalized. This climate of fear has intensely focused on migrants and asylum seekers, frequently making them targets of political and media-driven accusations. Such representations have not only shaped public attitudes and political tendencies but, in some cases, have also led to acts of violence against asylum seekers (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018, 2). Considering this framework, migration is constructed not merely as a social phenomenon but also as a politically manufactured crisis within the axis of right-wing populism, a crisis constructed not based on objective evidence but through discursive practices. Indeed, populist leaders often exaggerate migration flows as a political strategy, blaming certain actors for the crisis and presenting themselves as the savior (Moffitt, 2016, 118,129).

In other respects, from the perspective of right-wing populism, opposition to migrants is grounded not only in economic or security concerns but also in a broader societal reaction. Building upon the perspective that interprets the rise of right-wing populism through the concept of cultural backlash, it can be contended that the rapid transformation of liberal values in society has engendered a sense of identity threat among many individuals. In this context,

migrants are perceived not only as foreigners but also as symbolic representatives of the rapidly changing cultural landscape (Norris - Inglehart, 2019, 18). Consequently, rhetoric emphasizing the protection of culture has gained prominence within populist campaigns. In this vein, Marine Le Pen serves as a prominent example of a political figure who characterizes migrants as a “threat to French values that depletes resources” (“Marine Le Pen Calls Immigration a ‘THREAT’ to French Values during Attack on Globalisation” (2017)).

Correspondingly, the rise of anti-migrant sentiment within the framework of right-wing populism can also be traced to structural transformations. Global economic and political dynamics, the decentralization of decision-making processes, and crises of representation have generated a sense of alienation among the public. In this context, right-wing populism emerges as a reaction against increasingly inaccessible decision-making centers (Brubaker, 2017, 3–4). Thus, anti-migrant sentiment acts as a simplified narrative that functions to provide a tangible target in response to complex systemic problems. The oppositional discourse of right-wing populism toward migrants not only promotes exclusion but also plays a significant role in redefining national identity. This process, centered on the notion of nativeness, aims to reconstruct social solidarity based on ethnic and cultural purity (Brubaker, 2017, 26–29).

In this context, the migrant figure serves as a symbol of the negative boundaries of national identity. Within this framework, the migrant is portrayed as a key “other” in right-wing populist discourse. This figure not only justifies exclusionary policies but also plays a significant role in the construction of the populist political subject. Right-wing populism mobilizes fears and identities through anti-migrant sentiment, making the analysis of the migrant figure essential not only for understanding migration policies but also for comprehending the broader transformation of contemporary democracies.

However, the way the migrant figure is constructed in right-wing populist discourses, often characterized by exclusionary and threat-centered narratives, does not operate uniformly across all contexts. Political actors’ approaches to migration may reflect different perspectives shaped by historical experiences, regional ties, and cultural influences. In the case of Türkiye, especially after accepting Syrian refugees post-2011, these differences become more significant. Migration policies adopted by the AK Party reflect a discourse rooted in religious and humanitarian references. This discourse differs in certain respects from the exclusionary language and border-security-focused strategies embraced by right-wing populist groups in the West. Nevertheless, whether these differences are structural or conjunctural, and how their long-term social impacts will unfold, requires further empirical investigation.

2.4. Migration Policies in Türkiye in the Post-2011 Period

The civil war that began in Syria in 2011 confronted Türkiye with a forced migration movement involving millions of people for the first time in its recent history. During the initial large-scale migration wave, which unfolded between 2011 and 2015, Türkiye adopted an “open door policy”. Tent camps were established in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa, while Syrian asylum seekers were referred to as “guests”. This designation did not grant them any formal legal status and led to assumptions that their stay in the country would be short-term and temporary (İçduygu, Ahmet - Şimşek, 2016, 60). However, as the civil war in Syria prolonged, this approach proved insufficient. By 2014, Türkiye aimed to implement more permanent regulations in migration management. In line with this goal, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection was enacted that year to address legal ambiguities concerning Syrians. The same year, the Temporary Protection Regulation was issued, granting Syrians “temporary protection status” and defining their rights, including identity documentation, access to health care, education, social assistance, and access to work permits under specific limitations. These regulations clarified Syrians’ rights and made it easier for public institutions to manage the process (Kap, 2014, 32).

In the summer of 2015, the irregular migration of Syrians to Europe increased significantly, constituting the second major wave of migration. During this period, thousands of refugees faced severe humanitarian crises. In response, the European Union signed a Joint Action Plan with Türkiye in November 2015 to manage migration. Under this agreement, Türkiye was to receive three billion euros in support, the EU accession process was to be revitalized, and visa liberalization was to be expedited. By 2016, Türkiye entered a process focused on integration, beginning to grant Syrians legal rights such as work permits (İçduygu, Ahmet - Şimşek, 2016, 61). From 2011 onward, Türkiye had accepted Syrians crossing its borders under a discourse and practice of temporariness; however, with this new phase, migration policies in Türkiye transformed from being purely technical-administrative matters to encompassing discursive, social, and political dimensions. In this regard, analyzing the use of the “ensar-muhacir” metaphor in official documents and public statements after 2015 is considered significant.

Between these years, it is generally observed that Syrian migrants were perceived under the status of “guests,” with themes of solidarity and mutual aid emphasized in public discourse; however, institutional arrangements were limited by a “temporariness” perspective (Alemin - Bekçe, 2021, 56). This emphasis on temporality can be identified as a consistent policy axis in

both national regulations and public rhetoric. Nevertheless, the discourse developed by the AK Party during this period did not remain static but evolved over time. Initially characterized by humanitarian, religious, and cultural references, the approach gradually acquired a more instrumental nature with the incorporation of concepts such as security and deportation in subsequent years.

Particularly from 2017 onward, it has been noted that the policies pursued prioritized facilitating the return of migrants under temporary protection rather than their permanent integration. Since 2017, Türkiye has put the return of Syrians and the establishment of safe zones on the agenda. In 2019, 373,592 Syrians left Türkiye, and approximately 580,000 individuals were sent to safe areas in Syria. In 2020, 38,235 Syrians voluntarily returned to their country; in 2021, 32,581; and in 2022, 58,758. According to data, more than 300,000 returns were confirmed between January 2016 and November 2021 (Geyik Yildirim, 2023, 198).

Conversely, in the early months of 2020, Türkiye experienced a critical turning point in its migration governance. Following official declarations acknowledging the challenges posed by the increasing migrant population, significant migratory flows emerged along the border regions leading to Europe. During this period, Türkiye implemented a distinct policy by opening its border crossings to migrants attempting to enter Europe. This policy, which lasted for approximately one month, was intended to signal that the magnitude of migratory pressure had surpassed Türkiye's capacity for unilateral management. The heightened border activity was subsequently interpreted as a strategic appeal for enhanced international cooperation to equitably share the migration burden borne by Türkiye (Avyüzer Zobar, 2021, 26).

In this vein, migration policies pursued by the AK Party post-2020 reflect a strategically evolving framework prioritizing border security, the prevention of irregular migration, and the promotion of voluntary return (Çataklı, 2024). The implementation of enhanced physical security measures along border zones, expansion of deportation center capacities, and institutionalization of voluntary return initiatives targeting Syrian migrants have been systematically observed (Çataklı, 2024, 167–168). Consequently, Türkiye's migration governance has transitioned from the earlier "open door policy" toward securitized border management practices, including the construction of border walls in eastern provinces. This shift is attributable not only to international security concerns such as trafficking and terrorism but also to heightened domestic sociopolitical pressures, including intensified nationalist discourses. Within this transformed paradigm, border controls have been rearticulated beyond

mere migration regulation, serving discursive functions aimed at safeguarding national security and public order (Özbey, 2022, 735).

In statements made by the AK Party after 2018, there is a noticeable distancing from the “ensar-muhacir” metaphor (Sönmez - Üzmez, 2024, 334). This shift indicates that policies towards Syrians have been shaped by efforts to maintain social cohesion, while also ensuring that security concerns are not compromised. The policies implemented are flexible and contingent upon political and societal needs, reflecting a variable character (Sönmez - Üzmez, 2024, 335). Within the context of foreign policy, migration has been employed as a tool of “migration diplomacy” (Özdal - Argalı, 2023, 21). Migration diplomacy is defined as a multidimensional form of diplomacy that utilizes migration as an instrument of foreign policy, closely linked to national and local security concerns, economic interests, public diplomacy, and the reinforcement of soft power elements. In this framework, migration is understood not merely as a humanitarian or demographic issue, but as a comprehensive policy domain managed by states to gain influence in international relations, secure economic benefits, and shape security policies (Özdal - Argalı, 2023, 22). In agreements and funding negotiations with the European Union, commitments to control migration have been employed as a bargaining tool. Accordingly, readmission agreements, border security projects, and financial aid have emerged as key components of migration management within the foreign policy arena.

In this regard, academic studies reveal that between 2011 and 2025, the AK Party’s migration policy was characterized by an approach centered on “temporariness,” “return,” “border security,” and “migration diplomacy,” which was reflected both in the party’s discourse and in its legal and regulatory practices.

2.5. The Discursive Construction of Migration Policies during the AK Party Era

In the initial stages of the migration process, the AK Party government developed a discursive framework that emphasized Türkiye’s historical, cultural, and religious bonds. During this period, the “ensar-muhacir” analogy was frequently invoked; accepting Syrians into Türkiye was depicted as a moral and historical responsibility. Within this approach, migrants were referred to as “guests,” regardless of their legal status or citizenship. This designation made their protection status temporary and kept their social standing at a certain distance from the host society (Baban et al., 2017, 4–5). The “ensar-muhacir” discourse also seeks to enhance social acceptance by framing the reception of Syrians within the context of religious and moral

values. However, such statements are debated in the literature, mainly because they emphasize cultural values over legal obligations. Some studies argue that this approach has shaped public policies toward migrants not on a rights-based foundation, but rather on a foundation of charity and compassion, which has led to limited social integration under the framework of temporary protection (Yıldız - Uzgören, 2016, 3–4).

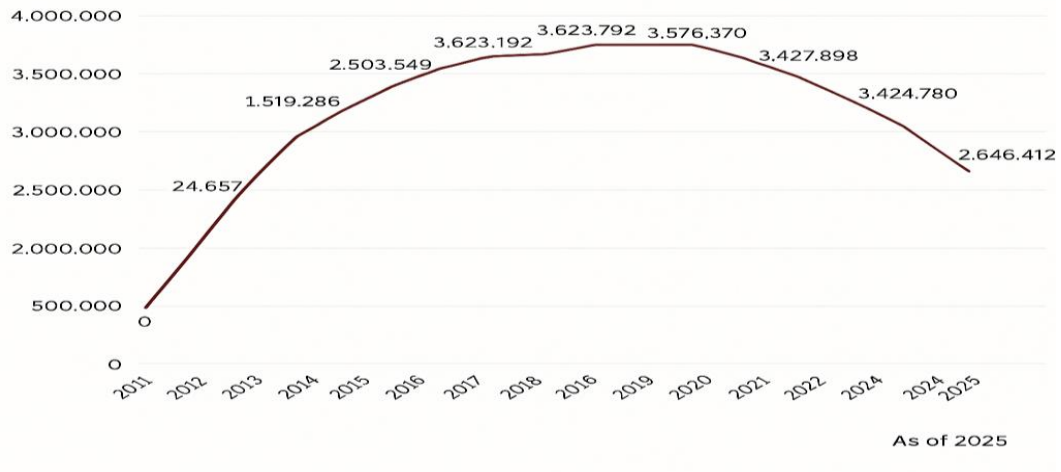
Following 2013, shifts in migration policy started to appear due to the increasing number of migrants and the rising social challenges at the local level. Especially in border provinces, the strain on infrastructure capacity, the prevalence of informal labor in the job market, growing demand for public services, and social cohesion issues prompted political actors to adopt new tones in their discourse on migration. During this period, Syrians under “temporary protection” were no longer defined solely as “guests,” but also began to be recognized as agents of societal transformation (Memisoglu - Ilgit, 2017, 9–13).

Following these developments, terms like “burden,” “crisis,” “border security,” and “voluntary return” started to appear more often in migration policy discourse. For instance, since 2015, many official statements have highlighted the financial costs related to Syrians, along with claims that Türkiye has not received enough international support, and assertions have gained traction in public debate. During this period, migration increasingly became an issue intertwined with domestic politics. It was debated in connection with topics such as local elections, the distribution of public services, and social assistance programs:

“In all the crises in our region, particularly in Syria and Iraq, we have stood by democracy, freedoms, justice, and what is right. As was just mentioned, over 3.6 million Syrians are now at our borders. When we include Iraqis and Afghans, this number reaches 4 million. We opened both our doors and our hearts without any discrimination, and we did so despite some. According to UN estimates, we have spent over 37 billion dollars on Syrian refugees to date...Unfortunately, during this process, many of our Western neighbors chose to hide behind high walls and to seek peace behind barbed wire fences. Neither the cries of mothers and fathers holding the lifeless, tiny bodies of their children, nor the images of torture from prisons, nor the tears of innocent children were, sadly, enough to make some take action...” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ‘(Suriyeli Mülteciler) Pek Çok Batılı Komşumuz Yüksek Duvarlar Arkasına Saklanmayı Tercih Etti’” (2019)).

Discursive transformation has manifested itself not only in content but also in specific targets. Even though migration discourses were initially framed within the context of national unity and religious and humanitarian responsibility, they were subsequently reshaped to align with the perceptions of different social groups (Çoban, 2024, 16).

Table 1. Number of Syrians under Temporary Protection by Year



Source: (“Yıllara Göre Geçici Koruma Altında Bulunan Suriyelilerin Sayısı” (2025))

Taken together, it is quite difficult to argue that the AK Party’s migration-related policies and discourse in the post-2011 period have followed a fixed or static line. On the contrary, they have evolved into a multi-layered structure and positioning, reconfigured in response to both domestic and international developments. The humanitarian and religious language adopted at the outset gradually became intertwined with notions of security, capacity, and international support, reflecting a degree of flexibility aligned with both local and global dynamics.

Therefore, the analysis of migration discourse should not be limited to the concepts utilized but must also consider when, where, and in what context these concepts are used. Thus, the function of the discourse can be understood not only as defining the identity of migrants but also as an instrument to regulate society, manage the political sphere, and shape foreign relations.

The rapid increase in migration to Türkiye since 2011 has prompted various changes in public policies, perceptions, and everyday representations. Although the discourse and practices developed by the AK Party during this period do not directly determine the public opinion regarding migrants, as frequently discussed in the literature, how specific discursive patterns are received by society remains an important area of investigation (Çoban, 2024).

In the early stages of migration following the Syrian crisis, the AK Party employed a humanitarian discourse centered on the “ensar-muhacir” metaphor, which was primarily understood through religious and cultural associations. This discourse was particularly well received by conservative and religiously oriented segments of the population. President Erdoğan emphasized that the assistance provided was not conditioned by the “religious”,

“sectarian”, or “ethno-cultural” background of those in need. This discourse establishes a symbolic association with Islamic history by contextualizing assistance given within the framework of Hijra, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad. Such expressions seem to serve to mitigate societal backlash against Syrian migrants and build a more favorable social attitude through religious references. However, the AK Party’s concurrent use of the “guest” discourse falls short not only of generating a call for responsibility as compelling as the *ensar-muhacir* metaphor grounded in Islamic obligation but also in meeting legal responsibilities (Devran, 2016, 44).

Another important aspect of this process is adjusting the official discourse on migrants in response to public reactions at times. In the literature, this has been referred to as “showing awareness” or “adapting to local responses” (Memisoglu - Ilgit, 2017, 324). Nonetheless, there is no consensus in the literature regarding the extent to which such discursive shifts influence actual policy implementation. Another crucial source of how migrants are represented is the media. Over time, the representation of migrants in both mainstream and digital media has expanded not only in volume but also in diversity. Accordingly, while some analyses highlight portrayals of migrants as “needy,” “victims,” or “guests,” representations depicting them as “criminals” or “threats” have also become increasingly prominent (Göker - Keskin, 2015, 242).

2.6. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the phenomenon of migration is not merely an individual act of relocation but a multilayered social process with socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions. In this sense, migration appears to generate significant changes in both origin and destination societies, where individuals’ identities, statuses, and social roles are constantly redefined. The prevalent voluntary-forced dichotomy in the literature falls short of capturing the complex, intersectional, and contextual nature of migration processes; legal and bureaucratic classifications often obscure the multifaceted character of migration. Furthermore, the politicization of migration exposes these conceptual ambiguities, transforming the figure of the migrant into a contested subject within strategic domains such as security, economy, and culture.

Upon examination of the existing literature, it becomes evident that the exclusionary and threat-oriented discourses of right-wing populist parties toward migrants illustrate how migration is strategically instrumentalized within the political arena. In the right-wing populist

mindset, themes like “border protection,” “the threat to national identity,” and “economic burden” have become discursive practices through anti-migrant sentiments that are ideologically, culturally, and economically reinforced. Indeed, such discursive practices are notably used by right-wing populist parties in Europe, as they take advantage of public fears and identity crises. Considering these dynamics, the migrant figure is reduced to issues of social and legal adaptability and framed as a threatening “others” that criminalize a specific group of people based on their lack of nativeness through the politicization of migration by radical right-wing populist politics.

Taking into account these characteristics of right-wing populism, this study focuses on the case of Türkiye, which diverges in notable ways from classical right-wing populist anti-migrant attitudes based on a discourse analysis of the AK Party era. Utilizing concepts that emphasize embrace and communal belonging in their discourse, despite the populist nature of the AK Party, can be interpreted as a strategy that redefines migrants within the framework of social cohesion rather than adopting an anti-migrant stance. However, it remains debatable whether this discourse is genuinely inclusive or merely strategic. This is because the seemingly inclusive discourse towards migrants, in practice, offers a conditional, limited, and fragile form of inclusion, constructed around a definition of “us” based on religious and cultural elements.

Therefore, the question of whether the AK Party’s discourse on migrants primarily functions as a vehicle for normative value transmission or as a context-dependent strategic maneuver remains open to discussion. Instead of trying to reach definitive conclusions about the similarities or differences between the AK Party’s migration policies and discourses and those of right-wing populist parties in the West, this study focuses on examining the contexts in which these discourses are produced and the meanings they convey. It is anticipated that this analysis, conducted through discourse analysis, will enable a more comprehensive and critical assessment of Türkiye’s position within the literature on right-wing populism.

CHAPTER 3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Research Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research method based on a literature review is adopted in the first and second main chapters. Within this framework, the existing literature on the subject is analyzed through an interpretive approach, aiming to develop an in-depth understanding of the research questions. Different perspectives and approaches in the literature are examined comparatively to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the topic. Accordingly, this chapter discusses the qualitative research method employed in the study, outlines the thematic analysis, and evaluates its suitability for the research objectives. It then explains the selection criteria and scope of the sample used for the analysis, along with the rationale behind these choices. Finally, the chapter applies the thematic analysis to the selected sample and elaborates on the codes and themes used within the methodological framework. Correspondingly, the aim of this chapter is to clarify the analytical criteria that constitute the final step necessary for conducting the analysis. In doing so, it establishes a framework that enables the literature review presented in the first two chapters and the research method of thematic analysis to be integrated and employed together in the subsequent analytical section.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that, while identifying visible patterns, also uncovers the more subtle meanings within the data. Its applicability to both interpretive-creative and scientific-systematic analyses provides researchers considerable methodological flexibility, thereby enabling its use across diverse data types and research questions (Finlay, 2021, 103–104). In this study, an interpretivist thematic analysis approach is adopted, emphasizing the contextual and socially constructed nature of meanings. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, concepts such as “migrant” and “us versus them” are treated as dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed or objective. Building on this theoretical framework, the study examines its sample not only at the level of visible content but also through the relationships between codes and themes, aiming to capture the deeper, contextually grounded meanings embedded in the discourse.

Within this line of inquiry, the AK Party's discourse on migration is not acknowledged in this study as a fixed and stable structure with consistent meanings, but rather as a discursive field that is produced, shaped, and reproduced within Türkiye's socio-political environment.

The analysis focuses on how the party defines migrants, the meanings it assigns to them, and how it constructs a distinction between “us versus them” through these meanings is analyzed through codes and themes. As a result, the codes and themes are used to understand how the AK Party constructs a discourse by combining specific elements in its meaning-making practices about migrants in both domestic and foreign political spheres.

Within this framework, the analysis is conducted in line with the main objective of the study, which is to examine whether the AK Party’s official discourse on migration differs from that of right-wing populist parties, and focuses on the following aspects:

- How migrants are discursively positioned,
- Which concepts become central components of the discursive field,
- How distinctions between *us* and *them* are constructed through specific discursive mechanisms, and
- How perceptions of migrants evolve and the roles these perceptions play in shaping both domestic and foreign policy.

In this regard, the study seeks to identify the factors that may influence the AK Party’s attitude toward migrants, including the “us versus them” dichotomy, socioeconomic conditions, and other dynamics specific to Türkiye.

3.1.1. Concepts and Theory

As outlined earlier, this study aims to examine the reasons behind the moderate approach of the AK Party, often characterized in the literature as right-wing populist, toward migration, specifically Syrian migrants residing in Türkiye. In doing so, populism’s classical dichotomy between “us versus them” is one of the main concepts of the analysis. On the other hand, Türkiye’s right-wing political tradition, socio-political factors, and the intense waves of migration Türkiye has faced in recent years, as outlined in the literature review section, appear as guiding elements for addressing the main research question. Through these dynamics specific to Türkiye, the study seeks to uncover the construction of the perception of Syrian migrants within the AK Party’s migration discourses. In connection with this, the ultimate aim of the study is to explore both the reasons behind the divergence of Turkish right-wing populism from Western European examples and the positioning of migrants within the “us versus them” dichotomy.

In this context, a qualitative analysis has been adopted based on the assumption that quantitative data alone would be insufficient to analyze the AK Party's discourse on migrants, and that understanding the context in which the discourse is produced is crucial. Qualitative research offers an interpretive methodological framework that aims to understand phenomena in depth within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Denzin - Lincoln, 2018). Accordingly, this study adopts thematic analysis as methodology and the Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffe as its theoretical framework.

Unlike traditional approaches, Laclau and Mouffe do not confine discourse to the linguistic domain. Instead, they understand it as encompassing all elements that constitute the social, functioning as a structuring principle in the production of meaning (Laclau - Mouffe, 2001). From this perspective, social reality is discursively constructed; that is, social phenomena can be analyzed through the ways they are discursively formed (Jørgensen - Phillips, 2006, 24). This approach views reality as a construct shaped within a specific temporal and cultural context. Reality, then, is not a fixed or given entity but a dynamic process shaped within specific temporal and cultural contexts. It emerges through ongoing social interactions, rather than existing as an external and objective domain independent of them.

Building on this understanding of discourse as a socially constructed reality, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize discourse as a structured totality in which meanings are only partially fixed through the relations established among elements within a specific field. Within this relational configuration, elements acquire their identities. Once they gain identity, these elements become "moments," whereas those remaining outside the discourse continue to exist as "elements" (Laclau - Mouffe, 2001, 105). In this framework, discourse is organized around particular "nodal points," privileged signifiers that temporarily fix meaning and shape the identities of other elements. Discourse theory thus functions as an analytical lens through which one can examine how meaning becomes momentarily fixed, around which nodal points such fixations occur, and how the boundaries of discourse are defined (Jørgensen - Phillips, 2006, 26). In line with this theoretical framework, thematic analysis provides the codes and themes upon which the empirical analysis is constructed.

Applying this theoretical approach, the present study confines its empirical focus to Syrian migrants, who have constituted a substantial wave of migration following the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The large number of Syrian migrants and their unique legal status in Türkiye have rendered them highly salient in both political and societal spheres. Consequently, these two factors have been pivotal in delineating the parameters of the present research.

In accordance with the aim and scope of this research, the official speeches of President

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who serves both as the leader of the AK Party and as a dominant political actor in Turkish politics, are analyzed. The study adopts a text-based qualitative approach, relying solely on the official texts of Erdoğan's speeches without incorporating data from interviews, observations, or surveys. The analysis is situated within Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, and Erdoğan's discourse is examined through an explanatory thematic analysis to explore how hegemonic structures, antagonistic relations, empty signifiers, and identity construction processes are constituted within his discourse. Thematic analysis is particularly well suited to this framework, as it enables the systematic examination of data while allowing flexibility for the researcher to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings. This approach facilitates the identification of contextual and multilayered meanings, offering a holistic understanding of the data.

In discourse theory, meaning can never be permanently fixed; rather, discourse itself is formed through attempts to fix meaning. Meaning is discursively produced and continuously reshaped through hegemonic power relations. Within this framework, thematic analysis not only identifies themes within the data but also reveals how these themes are connected to hegemonic processes that operate within broader social and political contexts. Through this lens, the analysis examines how migration is framed in the party's official discourse and how particular narratives have been constructed over time, while also enabling an exploration of how the discourse constructs the notion of "us" and simultaneously the formation of "them," thereby illuminating the discursive production of internal and external enemy perceptions.

3.1.2. Sampling

The dataset of this study consists of President Erdoğan's speeches available on the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. The texts are obtained from the "Speeches" category by using four keywords determined as filters to ensure their relevance to the research. Since the speeches included in this category are delivered in various contexts, events, and locations, they are considered to provide sufficient diversity for the dataset. The time frame of the selected texts extends from August 28, 2014, which is the earliest date available for filtering on the website and marks the beginning of Erdoğan's presidency, to October 1, 2025, representing the present.

In the first step of selecting the speeches for analysis, the texts are listed based on whether they contain any of the following four keywords: "migrant", "Syrian", "asylum seeker", or "refugee". The keywords are chosen to ensure texts capture both general and specific meanings.

The most general term, “migrant” is included to encompass broad migration-related references. “Syrian” is selected to reflect the study’s specific focus on Syrian migrants, while “asylum seeker” and “refugee” are included to capture references to legal status within Türkiye and international status. Accordingly, under the “Speeches” category on the Presidency’s website, the dataset comprised 73 texts with “migrant”, 246 with “Syrian”, 154 texts with “asylum seeker,” and 91 with “refugee” included in either the title or the main text.

Considering the large number of texts obtained through the filtering process is substantial, and some keywords appeared in contexts unrelated to the research question (e.g., in greetings or as a single, isolated occurrence within a sentence), all texts are reviewed in detail prior to the sample selection. Each text is evaluated not only based on the presence of a keyword as a filter but also considering the context in which the word used. Accordingly, texts that did not provide meaningful data for the analysis are excluded from the sample. Following this, the total number of texts amounted to 181, accounting for overlaps due to the presence of multiple keywords in a single text, and 113 unique texts were identified among all texts containing any of the keywords. As a result of these procedures, the Excel file compiled using the four keywords constituted the dataset to be used in the study.

The sample size is determined as 35 texts out of the 113 available, aiming to ensure both analytical depth and contextual representativeness. This number is grounded in the approach of Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016, 1759), who argue that in qualitative research, sample size should be determined by the dataset’s information power and the level of analytical saturation rather than by a fixed rule. In analyses with high theoretical intensity, such as those based on discourse theory, a sample of 20-30 units is generally considered sufficient to capture thematic diversity and trace discursive patterns. Wutich, Beresford, and Bernard (2024, 7) also state that a sample comprising 20–30 units is sufficient in text-based qualitative analyses to achieve theoretical saturation. Accordingly, in this study, the number of texts to be analyzed using the qualitative thematic analysis method are set at 35 to ensure both analytical depth and historical representativeness. The sample size of the study is grounded in the principle of “analytical saturation,” frequently cited in the qualitative research literature. In studies with high contextual and theoretical intensity, saturation is considered achieved when no new themes or discursive patterns emerge despite the addition of new data (Braun - Clarke, 2022, 203). Consequently, a sample of 35 texts is regarded as sufficient to ensure both thematic diversity and continuity of content.

In this regard, the dataset for this study consists of 113 conversations from 2014 to 2025. Taking 35 samples from this universe corresponds to the 20-30% range commonly used in qualitative studies and ensures proportional representation. In line with this, the sample is selected proportionally according to the number of texts each year, thereby ensuring both the representation of the historical context and the traceability of discursive developments. The principle of proportional distribution across years is employed in the selection of the sample, with allocation determined according to each year's share of the total number of texts. Initially, the number of texts per year is divided by the overall total to calculate the proportion of that year within the dataset. The procedure is applied to all years, with the resulting decimal values rounded to the nearest whole number, and in some years, adjustments of ± 1 are made to ensure that the total sample does not exceed thirty-five. This procedure aims to ensure both historical continuity and discursive diversity in the analysis. It is also grounded in studies such as Malterud et al. (2016) and Wutich et al. (2024), emphasizing that sample size in qualitative research should be determined not by fixed numbers but according to principles of contextual representativeness and analytical saturation.

The number of texts to be selected for each year is determined by considering the ratio of the number of texts per year to the total. Following this, a random sampling method is used to select texts from each year. Random selection is preferred in order to minimize researcher bias in the sample and to ensure impartial representation. Nevertheless, since the data to be analyzed consists of discourse, mere randomness is deemed insufficient, and inclusion of texts in the sample is conditioned on meeting specific exclusion criteria. Within this framework, texts that are repetitive, procedural, or low in discursive intensity are excluded, and a random selection is conducted from the remaining texts. Consequently, the sample is constructed to maintain both analytical saturation and contextual diversity, ensuring that the selection is reproducible and methodologically robust.

The table below presents the number of speeches per year alongside the number of texts included in the sample:

Table 2. Sampling Table

Year	Total Speeches	Sampled
2025	6	2
2024	5	2
2023	3	1
2022	6	2
2021	6	2
2020	9	3
2019	23	7
2018	14	4
2017	5	2
2016	21	6
2015	11	3
2014	4	1
Total	113	35

This distribution is structured to maintain both historical continuity and discursive diversity. Rounding is also applied with consideration for analytical saturation and contextual representativeness. As the corpus consists entirely of publicly accessible speeches, formal ethical approval is deemed unnecessary, however, all research procedures are conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. The sampling process, exclusion criteria, and the logic behind coding are clearly documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The coding process is structured in line with the literature and the main concepts of discourse theory, including antagonistic structures, inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, and identity construction.

The coding framework is developed and categorized around both the theoretical approach and the data derived from the sample. Each text is read at least twice, in addition to the initial reading conducted during sampling, to ensure the reliability of thematic patterns, and coded using MAXQDA software.

In view of these considerations, one of the principal limitations of this study is that the analytical framework is defined to cover the period of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency and primarily focuses on the discursive processes that have emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 Refugee Crisis, when migration became an international concern. Given that the Syrian civil war began in 2011, it escalated into an international crisis by 2015, as noted in the literature review. In this respect, another significant limitation arises from the study's focus, as the large volume of texts available from different sources or through the existing categories on the Presidency's website, even a relatively large sample, cannot capture all relevant data.

3.2. Thematic Framework and Coding Process

This section explains how the codes and themes are developed to systematically analyze the migration discourse in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speeches delivered between 2014 and 2025, based on the sampling described in the previous section. In line with the main objective of the study, this section presents the framework of codes and themes employed in the analysis, aiming to understand how the AK Party's migration discourse is shaped by local dynamics and socio-political references in comparison with that of right-wing populist parties in the West. In accordance with this objective, selected speeches delivered by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan between 2014 and 2025 are evaluated using a discourse analysis approach that enables systematic examination of the political, social, and diplomatic dimensions of migration. The coding process is structured to reveal the conceptual clusters around which this discourse is centered, the values, norms, or objectives with which migration is associated, and how it functions across different contexts. The themes developed based on the codes allow for the systematic identification of the main orientations shaping the AK Party's migration discourse by transforming recurring patterns of meaning within the discourse into a coherent structure.

Accordingly, this section provides a detailed explanation of the process through which codes and themes are developed, clearly outlining the methodological foundations underlying the analyses presented in the subsequent chapters. It describes the logic behind the creation of codes, the types of keywords each code encompasses, how the relationship between keywords

and the textual context is evaluated, and how the codes are grouped to form themes. In this way, the section aims to clarify the methodological basis on which the inferences presented in the analysis are drawn.

3.2.1. Code Grouping and Theme Development

Reading the data without using analytical tools is not sufficient on its own for making generalizations or conducting comparative evaluations. Coding is considered necessary in this study to capture frequently emphasized clusters of meaning within the texts, to reveal the functional aspects of the discourse, and to transform different passages into a comparable framework. Accordingly, identifying themes that emerge from converging codes not only allows these clusters to be conceptualized at a theoretical level but also facilitates interpreting codes as parts of a whole based on their contextual relationships through the themes.

As presented in the previous section, the data set consists of speech texts delivered by President Erdoğan between 2014 and 2025. The coding process in this study occurs in three successive stages: (1) initial reading and pre-coding, (2) grouping of codes, and (3) theme development. In the first stage, the entire dataset is read line by line in detail; recurring discourse patterns describing, legitimizing, criticizing policies, or diplomatically positioning migration are identified and noted, and keywords facilitating the coding of these patterns are identified. Once the relevant keywords are determined, they are re-evaluated in terms of their content, discourse, and functional dimensions, taking the context of each text into account. Based on the textual context, the keywords are grouped to form codes, which are then organized into themes according to the relationships among the codes. Sentences or short paragraphs serve as coding units. If a passage corresponds to more than one code, multiple coding is applied; in analyzing, the code that best reflects the passage's context and dominant function is highlighted and used.

Accordingly, the codes, which are developed based on the identified keywords and the context related to the dates of the texts, are determined as follows: "Religious Solidarity, Common History as Unity, Political Positioning Against the Opposition, Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument, Voluntary Return, Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument, Burden-Sharing, Western-centered Values, and Call for International Justice".

The nine codes identified are derived from recurring discourse patterns in the sampled texts, taking into account the internal consistency and context of texts. Accordingly, two main themes are developed through grouping the codes based on their associations. The key principle in

assigning codes to themes is how often the codes are utilized and with which codes are found together, considering their complementary functions.

This process is carried out based on the semantic proximity of codes, their functional connections, and how often they appear together in the data. The two themes are titled “Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values” and “International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy”. Subsequent re-analysis of these nine codes, based on discourse units, allows for a better understanding of the different functional dimensions of migration discourse. This process, through the systematic examination of codes and the evaluation of their contexts, makes it possible to identify these two main themes. These two themes facilitate the presentation of two distinct migration discourses in President Erdoğan’s speeches included in the data set, reflecting domestic and foreign policy contexts. Indeed, it can be observed that randomly selected speech texts tend to align with the content corresponding to these two themes. At the same time, the frequent co-occurrence of discourses related to both themes within the same speech indicates that the domestic and foreign policy functions in Erdoğan’s migration discourse are not independent but form a complementary whole.

Texts evaluated under the domestic policy theme draw attention with expressions related to the construction of social belonging and the “us” perception. The codes encompassed by this theme indicate that Syrian migrants are incorporated by President Erdoğan into a unifying discourse within the framework of certain norms, values, and cultural references, while the opposition is marginalized due to discourses that undermine this unity. In this context, this theme functions as a lens for understanding how migration discourse, social cohesion, and solidarity are constructed, and on what basis the discourse regarding the opposition is formed. Conversely, in the foreign policy dimension, the theme reveals how the perception of “them” toward international actors and Türkiye’s strategies to shape this perception are constructed. The codes encompassed by this theme help illustrate the discursive use of migration in international relations by President Erdoğan, highlighting Türkiye’s position, guiding international perception, and questioning Western values. Thus, migration discourse can be understood as a multi-layered tool that structures social relations in domestic politics while simultaneously expressing the country’s diplomatic and strategic stance in foreign policy.

The first identified theme is titled “Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values”. This theme represents discourse patterns in which religious norms, civilizational belonging, and domestic political strategies are intertwined. Under this theme, the “Religious Solidarity” code and the “Common History as Unity” code constitute the normative justification

for migration; this normative justification is then translated into domestic political objectives through the “Positioning Against the Opposition” and “Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument” codes. The code “Voluntary Return” is positioned within this theme as both the practical implementation aspect and as a sub-element that concretizes the government’s “order and protection” rhetoric grounded in historical references. The analytical function of this theme is to reveal the domestic legitimization mechanisms of migration discourse, the connections between religious-national rhetoric and anti-opposition strategies, and how these evolve over time.

The second identified theme is titled “International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy”. This theme encompasses the codes “Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument,” “Burden-Sharing,” “Western-centered Values,” and “Call for International Justice”. When considered together, these codes demonstrate that migration is used as a tool for negotiation, normative pressure, and claims of legitimacy in international relations. The theme enables the analysis of frequently occurring discourse in the examined texts, integrating demands toward external actors, criticism of the West, and the emphasis on global justice. The analytical function of this second theme is to facilitate the evaluation of the relationship between migration discourse and foreign policy objectives, strategies for asserting international rights and exerting pressure, and the key critical narratives developed against Western-centered norms.

3.2.2. Analytical Description of the Identified Codes

Sampled texts drawn from speeches of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan between 2014 and 2025 are systematically examined to reveal the local, cultural, religious, and diplomatic elements that shape the AK Party’s migration discourse. The coding process is designed to identify patterns that can explain different dimensions of this discourse. The resulting codes enable insight into the values and frameworks shaping Erdoğan’s discourse on migration, as well as the aspects emphasized.

Coding aims to illustrate migration to be considered not only as a humanitarian or administrative issue but also as a multi-layered discursive construct that performs various functions in social relations and in an international context. Indeed, the themes generated through the grouping of codes aim to reveal the discursive structure that illustrates how the AK Party’s migration discourse functions at both domestic and foreign policy levels, how these two

levels complement each other, and ultimately whether the party diverges from right-wing populist examples in the West.

Table 3. Themes and Codes

Theme 1: Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values	Theme 2: International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy
Code 1: Common History as Unity	Code 1: Burden-Sharing
Code 2: Religious Solidarity	Code 2: Western-centered Values
Code 3: Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument	Code 3: Call for International Justice
Code 4: Positioning Against the Opposition	Code 4: Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument
Code 5: Voluntary Return	

The codes identified in the analysis are described below:

The code “Religious Solidarity” encompasses all statements in which the acceptance of Syrian migrants is justified by President Erdoğan through Islam-based rhetoric of brotherhood and supported in relation to religious obligations. This code is applied in cases where the text contains explicit religious references such as “ensar,” “muhacir,” “ummah,” “brother,” “guest,” “assistance,” “for the sake of Allah,” or “ecr,” and where these references are presented as a normative justification for helping migrants. Accordingly, passages that consist solely of general humanitarian appeals or rhetorical use of religious terms are excluded. The discursive function of the excerpts coded under this category is to foster acceptance of migrants from Syria among the public and to present assistance to migrants as a religious and moral obligation. Within this framework, in the context of migration from Syria, migrants are positioned by President Erdoğan within a sense of religiously grounded social belonging, aiming to integrate Syrian migrants into the collective “us”.

The code “Common History as Unity” covers excerpts in which migration is framed within the legacy of an ancient civilization, historical responsibility, and a sense of shared belonging. This code encompasses passages containing concepts such as “civilization,” “historical heritage,” “shared history,” “responsibility,” and “unity,” where migration is understood in terms of collective identity, belonging, and historical proximity. In the narratives included

under this code, migration is addressed within a shared civilization sphere grounded in Türkiye's historical and cultural accumulation. Migrants are presented as part of a community that shares the same values, beliefs, and historical background. Thus, the emphasis on civilization reinforces a sense of "us," strengthens social cohesion, and situates migration within the framework of cultural commonality. This code includes discourses that frame migration not as a technical or administrative matter but within the context of Türkiye's historical role and responsibility in a shared civilization. Its discursive function involves interpreting migration through the lens of national identity, historical mission, and civilization narratives, thereby enhancing the perception of collective belonging and unity.

The code "Positioning Against the Opposition" encompasses passages in which President Erdoğan addresses and criticizes the positions of the opposition regarding migration. In addition to direct references to "the opposition," "CHP," and "Bay Kemal," the code is applied when the opposition's migration policies are presented as inadequate or risky. General political polemics or criticisms weakly related to migration are excluded. Passages included under this code aim to frame the criticism of political rivals in domestic politics while reinforcing the government's migration management and policy choices, thereby enhancing public acceptance.

The code "Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument" covers instances where issues related to the Syrian migration and migrants are addressed strategically in domestic politics. In particular, texts in which migration discourse is used to gain voter support, build political credibility, or criticize opponents are categorized in this code. The code captures examples where humanitarian themes, such as the situation of migrants and the country's hospitality, are presented alongside political objectives. Statements that discuss migration only on humanitarian grounds or solely in terms of international responsibility are excluded. This code is applied when texts combine themes of compassion, solidarity, and moral duty with political messaging.

The code "Voluntary Return" encompasses statements encouraging Syrian migrants to return to their home countries voluntarily, often linked to support, incentive, or resettlement programs. Statements involving legal sanctions or coercion are excluded from this code. The discursive function of the code is to convey a message of "order and control" to the domestic public.

The code "Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument" encompasses all passages in which migration is framed in state discourse as a deliberate, goal-oriented instrument of foreign policy, beyond domestic politics. This code is applied in instances where migration flows are presented as conveying a diplomatic message to international actors. It captures

statements in which migration is not treated solely as a humanitarian issue to be managed, but as a means of sanction, warning, or diplomatic leverage, including the intentions, goals, or actions behind this framing. The scope of the code includes explicit expressions that define migration as a tool serving foreign policy objectives, as well as passages mentioning the opening or closing of borders, or decisions taken or threats in this context.

The code “Burden-Sharing” encompasses President Erdoğan’s critical statements directed at Western actors for not sharing the refugee burden and for failing to provide financial or logistical support. The main criterion for this code is that the criticism explicitly targets Western actors and refers to issues such as border management, insufficient funding, or lack of cooperation. Its discursive function is to construct a claim of legitimacy against external actors and to articulate international demands.

The code “Western-Centred Values” covers the inconsistencies, double standards, and contradictions that emerge in the discourse and practices of political actors who refer to Western-centred values in relation to the migration crisis. The core focus of this code is the discrepancy between Western political actors’ claims to values such as human rights, democracy, and justice, and their practical treatment of migrants. Rather than mere policy criticism or discussions of geopolitical interests, this code highlights how President Erdoğan exposes the normative contradictions of the West and the discursive frameworks that conflict with its own declared values regarding the migration crisis. It enables a systematic examination of Erdoğan’s emphasis on the contrast between the West’s proclaimed value discourse and its actual practices concerning migration.

The code “Call for International Justice” includes President Erdoğan’s calls for global burden-sharing, justice, and fair responsibility in the context of migration, as well as his calls directed at international institutions. A speech is classified under this code when it utilizes words such as justice, equality, and rights, and when these demands are explicitly addressed to international organizations. Diplomacy-oriented statements are not included. The discursive function of this code is to build legitimacy and to call for a fair and more balanced international order through the discourse of migration.

Ultimately, all of these codes presented above aim to systematically reveal the semantic dimension through which migration is constructed in President Erdoğan's discourse for the 2014-2025 period and the social, cultural, and diplomatic references on which these dimensions are grounded. The analytical framework developed through the coding process enables a comprehensive examination of the patterns that emerge across different contextual layers of migration discourse. In this way, the methodological framework presented in this section

provides a suitable foundation for a thematic analysis that assesses the discursive dynamics through which the AK Party's migration discourse differentiates itself from the exclusionary, security-oriented approaches of right-wing populist parties in the West, in accordance with the primary aim of the study.



CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS OF THE AK PARTY'S MIGRATION DISCOURSE

This chapter investigates the discourse on migration in the speeches of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from 2014 to 2025¹. The objective is to elucidate how President Erdoğan constructs the meaning of migration through the values, concepts, and dichotomies he frames and the ways in which this discourse functions within both domestic and foreign political arenas. This study limits the scope of migration to Syrian migrants residing in Türkiye. From this perspective, the analysis seeks to contribute to understanding how Erdoğan's and the AK Party's discourse on migration differs from the narratives adopted by right-wing populist parties in Western countries. As previously indicated, the analysis is conducted exclusively based on Erdoğan's own statements, with the internal logic of his discourse, its thematic concentrations, and its meaning patterns taken as the objects of analysis. The objective, in this regard, is not to validate any particular ideological category but to reveal the internal dynamics intrinsic to the discourse. Thus, it becomes possible to examine how Erdoğan constructs migration as a "problem," "responsibility," "value," or "burden," and how this conceptualization changes across different contexts.

Based on the examination of Erdoğan's speeches and the identification of relevant codes, the analysis is organized around two main themes. The first focuses on "Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values," while the second addresses "International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy". These themes reveal how migration is positioned in Erdoğan's discourse both within domestic political debates and in the foreign policy arena. The themes and their associated codes are presented in a sequential manner for each theme. With this approach, the analysis is intended to provide a stepwise examination of the structure of meaning, the elucidation of the relationships between codes and their corresponding themes, and the tracing of conceptual transitions throughout the discourse systematically. The contexts in which specific concepts are interrelated and the oppositions through which they acquire meaning are revealed. The codes employed in the analysis will be supported with direct quotations from Erdoğan's speeches. These quotations are intended to

¹ The table in the appendix presents the titles and dates of President Erdoğan's speeches that constitute the sampling. The texts used in the analysis are selected exclusively from the speeches listed in that table.

demonstrate that the codes are not merely abstract representations, but concrete clusters of meaning emerging from the discourse itself. In this way, the analysis aims to explicate Erdoğan's discourse on migration within its own context, relying directly on the texts, and to reveal both its internal coherence and its functional dimensions.

4.1. Theme 1: Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values

This theme examines how Erdoğan's discourse on migration is shaped through religious references, national belonging, and historical bonds of brotherhood. It is observed that, in his speeches, migration is frequently framed not merely as a humanitarian issue but as a phenomenon closely linked to Türkiye's historical legacy, cultural responsibilities, and moral values. In doing so, migration is situated within a realm of meaning at both the social and political levels. The political dimension of migration constitutes a significant area of scholarly debate. In some studies, politicization of migration is understood as the process through which migration transcends humanitarian or economic frameworks and becomes incorporated into states' domestic policy agendas, foreign policy strategies, and security discourses. Such discussions suggest that migration is not merely a demographic movement, but also a domain shaped by political discourses. At the same time, it is emphasized that politicization does not develop consistently across contexts, manifesting in distinct ways depending on countries' historical legacies, cultural references, and forms of political leadership (Castles - Miller, 2008, 31).

In this context, Erdoğan's discourse provides a perspective on the politicization of migration through the lens of the Türkiye case. In some instances, his speeches associate migration with political dimensions such as national security, social stability, or diplomatic responsibility, while simultaneously framing it through religious and moral references. Consequently, the politicization of migration in this instance appears to function within a value-based framework rather than a purely instrumental tool of strategic mobilization. In this respect, Erdoğan's discourse on migration diverges from conventional security-oriented narratives, yet it nonetheless retains a political function.

Aligned with this theme, the analysis is conducted across five primary codes: Religious Solidarity, Common History as Unity, Positioning Against the Opposition, Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument, and Voluntary Return. These codes are intended to reveal how religious and national references operate within Erdoğan's discourse on migration, the

discursive elements underpinning inclusive attitudes toward migrants, and how this discourse is positioned within domestic political debates. Each code is examined with representative examples drawn from Erdoğan's speeches, allowing for an analysis of the concepts around which the discourse is structured, the ways in which it is justified, and the contrasts through which it gains meaning.

4.1.1. Common History as Unity

In Erdoğan's discourse on migration, the concepts of "civilization" and "unity" emerge as two key elements that underscore both a historical trajectory and the production of political meaning. These concepts create a discursive space in which migration is understood along the axis of historical and cultural belonging. In his speeches over different periods, migration from Syria is portrayed as a natural extension of Türkiye's longstanding civilizational heritage. Syrian migrants are similarly represented as part of this historical trajectory and as members of the same cultural civilization. This approach fosters a shared sense of civilizational consciousness and unity in the context of migration. Accordingly, Erdoğan's speeches frequently frame migration in terms of Türkiye's historical role, cultural responsibilities, and social cohesion.

During his opening speech at the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye on 1 October 2019, Erdoğan uses the following statements:

"Being the heir to an ancient civilization and historical legacy brings us great prestige, but also imposes heavy responsibilities. Today, hundreds of millions of people in our region and around the world follow us with their hearts and eyes. Türkiye must concern itself not only with the issues of its neighbors, but also with those of all its brothers and friends who, though they may seem distant today, are in fact within the same civilizational and historical sphere."

In this remark, the statement "being the heir to an ancient civilization and historical legacy brings us great prestige, but also imposes heavy responsibilities," is central to Erdoğan's domestic narrative. Here, Erdoğan frames the phenomenon of migration in relation to civilizational heritage, presenting an inclusive approach to migrants as a historical responsibility and obligation. This discourse addresses migration in conjunction with Türkiye's historical identity.

It is possible to observe that this approach aligns with the broader scholarly discussions on the politicization of migration. In President Erdoğan's discourse, migration emerges as a

political arena in which values are subject to redefinition. Nevertheless, this politicization is not expressed through an exclusionary and security-oriented narrative as often seen in right-wing populist discourses in the West, but rather along the axis of shared history, unity, and solidarity. President Erdoğan's statement in his speech at the TÜGİK General Assembly on February 11, 2016, "Our civilization is one of compassion and mercy. In our society, there are no foreigners, only guests," represents one of the most explicit examples of this understanding. In this discourse, the notion of "us" is defined not by ethnic or national boundaries but through a shared historical consciousness.

It is also observed that the community, formed through civilizational bonds established via this historical connection, is at times used by President Erdoğan in a way that elevates it to the level of political opposition. In his speech at the 23rd Muhtars' Meeting on April 6, 2016, he states, "We have a thousand-year-old brotherhood with these people... Meanwhile, the head of the main opposition party describes them as a trouble; this is the difference between us". Within this discourse, the notion of "civilization" appears to function as an "empty signifier" in the sense conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe. Historical belonging, religious responsibility, conscience, and compassion come together to form a hegemonic field of meaning. Because it establishes an internal political boundary that portrays Syrian migrants as "us" while the opposition party attributes negative characteristics to them, this discourse positions the opposition party outside the constructed civilizational framework.

This rhetoric is systematically sustained in Erdoğan's speeches from 2024 and 2025, when the Syrian migration crisis gradually declines. In his speech following the Cabinet Meeting on July 17, 2025, President Erdoğan states: "We will continue to support our Syrian brothers and sisters. Those who seek a safe future through oppression and massacre should never forget this: they are the travelers, and we are the hosts. We are the rightful inhabitants of these lands. We have lived in this geography for a thousand years". These statements show that migration continues to be articulated through historical references. In this context, civilization operates as a narrative device that delineates the boundaries of political identity and redefines the moral framework through which Türkiye positions itself.

It is particularly evident in Erdoğan's speech following the Cabinet Meeting on December 9, 2024:

"Yes, borders may physically separate countries, but what power can draw borders between hearts? For centuries, we have lived together, and the border between us extends for 910 kilometers. Who can expect us to turn our backs on our neighbours with whom we share this 910-kilometer border?"

If one half of our heart is in Antep, Hatay, or Şanlıurfa, the other half is in Afrin, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus.”

Accordingly, in this discourse, borders are redefined not in geographical but in political, moral, and emotional terms. Thus, the “common history as unity” emphasis appears to function in Erdoğan’s migration discourse as a rhetorical strategy that articulates both a sense of historical belonging and the political use of migration through a value-oriented language.

4.1.2 Religious Solidarity

In Erdoğan’s migration discourse, the “ensar-muhacir” narrative emerges both as a historical religious reference and as a symbolic framework that reinforces social solidarity. Within this discourse, migration is presented not merely as a case of forced displacement but as a moral test imbued with the values of faith (iman), responsibility, and sharing. The notions of ensar and muhacir evoke the pattern of brotherhood associated with the Hijra in Islamic history, thereby providing a religious ground of legitimacy for Türkiye’s attitude toward migrants. In this way, migration in Erdoğan’s discourse ceases to be a technical aspect of governance and instead becomes a moral obligation and a manifestation of virtue.

In his speech at the tent city in Islahiye on October 7, 2014, President Erdoğan articulates the core framework of this narrative as follows:

“You have become the muhacir; you were compelled to leave your homes out of necessity. We have become the ensar and have mobilized all our resources for you. Whatever others may say, you are by no means a burden to us. In our civilization, in our culture, in our traditions, a guest is a blessing, a guest is an honor. You have granted us the privilege of being ensar you have honored our home, brought prosperity and joy to it”.

This emphasis redefines the presence of migrants not as a social cost but rather as a form of baraka (bereket), a source of spiritual and communal blessing. Thus, being ensar, in President Erdoğan’s words, constitutes a religious duty that embodies honor.

Erdoğan defines migrants as *Allah’ın emaneti* (God’s trust). He frames the protection of this trust as a *boyun borcu* (a binding duty). Indeed, in his speech delivered at the AFAD 22nd Logistics Center Mass Opening Ceremony on 8 February 2015, he states, “We are a nation that has the consciousness of the ensar. We regard every brother who comes to our country as a muhacir and welcome them with affection. We open our homes to them and share our bread”.

The expression “We share our bread” constructs the ensar-muhacir narrative through solidarity. The notion of “ensar consciousness” represents, beyond its historical reference, the reproduction of a social morality grounded in sharing and hospitality. Sharing bread functions as both an economic and spiritual gesture of equality, dissolving the distinction between host and guest. Thus, migration is redefined not as a burden upon the host, but as a source of brotherhood and *bereket* (abundance).

On the other hand, the narrative can also be expanded from a sense of social responsibility toward the political mission of the state. In this framework, “being an ensar” becomes not an individual virtue but a political choice and a mode of governance. Erdoğan’s words, “We could have been muhacir as well, but Rabbim (My Lord/God) granted us the honor of being ensar,” reflect this understanding. In this context, migration is presented as a manifestation of religious brotherhood established between social and political identities.

Examples that reflect the emotional and political impact of this discourse can also be found in Erdoğan’s discourse between 2022 and 2025. Erdoğan’s speech at the Library Conversations - Meeting with Youth Program on 19 May 2022, in which he emphasizes the ensar-muhacir relationship in reference to Syrian migrants who sought asylum in Türkiye, is particularly noteworthy:

“This, of course, also shows what about Türkiye? It shows its greatness. It shows Türkiye’s hospitality in this regard, and together with this hospitality, we see that Türkiye has come to the forefront as the country that currently receives the highest number of refugees in the world.”

This emphasis on moral and emotional themes continues in Erdoğan’s later statements. In the World Human Rights Day-The Face of Brotherhood Program held on 11 December 2024, Erdoğan remarks, “We have hosted Syrian muhacir for 13 years with the spirit of ensar,” thereby constructing a narrative of social success. At the same time, by saying, “We said this despite the Main Opposition in this country saying ‘We will expel you,’” he contrasts this approach with the opposition’s anti-migrant stance. This contrast appears to create a hegemonic structure that reproduces the boundary between “us versus them”. The notion of “us” represents faith, conscience, and compassion, while “them” is positioned as those who turn their backs on these values. In this way, a religious language of solidarity produces a distinct reflection in domestic politics.

In this regard, “Religious Solidarity” establishes a framework in Erdoğan’s migration discourse that approaches social unity, supported by religious references to the civilizational narrative, through notions of religious duty and responsibility. Within this discourse, migrants become subjects who are both victims in need of protection and figures associated with social virtue. The function of this discourse is to define migration not merely as a humanitarian issue but as a domain where faith, conscience, and political responsibility intersect, thereby reproducing both social solidarity and the value-based position of power.

4.1.3. Migration as a Domestic Political Instrument

In President Erdoğan’s discourse, migration in certain contexts functions not merely as a social issue but as an instrument that strengthens political stance, governing capability, and the claim to moral representation. Statements concerning migrants are occasionally employed to demonstrate the conscience of the nation, the state’s resolve, and the reliability of leadership. In this way, migration serves not only as a reminder of the values upheld by Türkiye but also as a political instrument that reinforces the legitimacy of the ruling power acting in accordance with those values. Indeed, President Erdoğan defines migration through references to faith, history, and culture, emphasizing that fulfilling this responsibility is an essential aspect of being a nation. His speech at the AFAD 22nd Logistics Center Mass Opening Ceremony on 18 February 2015 is a notable example of this approach:

“If we do not act in this way, would we not be betraying the trust of our faith, our history, and our culture? Do not mind those who call it ‘betrayal’ that we host our Syrian and Iraqi brothers in our country. Do not mind those who say that when they become Prime Minister, they will send the Syrians back to their country. They do not know what ensar means, they do not know what muhacir means, they do not know how open the hearts of our nation are. Because they do not know these, they can never become Prime Minister in this country, and they can never send anyone back to their homeland.”

In this quotation, the concepts of “trust” (emanet) and “betrayal” carry not only religious but also political meanings. Protecting and embracing migrants is equated with preserving the fundamental values of the nation. Those who oppose this stance are portrayed as morally and politically inadequate.

Building upon this moral framework, the discourse on migration during the 2016-2020 period preserves its ethical foundation while becoming increasingly associated with the power and resolve of the state. In his AK Party Group Meeting speech on 5 February 2019, Erdoğan

remarks, “The most distinct feature of Türkiye’s stance over the past sixteen years is that it has at all times and in all places taken a position on the side of what is right, just, and conscientious... When necessary, we also have the strength to pay the price for this stance”. Through this statement, he presents migration policy as both a reflection of conscience and a demonstration of strength. In this sense, it is possible to interpret migration as a field in which the government establishes a balance between responsibility and power.

In another speech delivered at the AK Party Group Meeting on 11 March 2020, Erdoğan addresses migration as an issue through which social unity and solidarity are tested:

“The real challenge is to prevent the internal acts of sabotage that target our unity and solidarity. As I have always stated, the true strength of our country lies in our nation’s determination to remain united, strong, vibrant, and brotherly, to stand together as Türkiye.”

In these statements, migration is framed as an indicator of the nation’s determination to remain resilient without internal division. Effective leadership, in turn, is defined by the ability to preserve this unity. Thus, within this discourse, migration becomes a domain in which governing capacity, the trust relationship established with society, and the “will to stand together” are instantiated. Indeed, Erdoğan’s speech at the Opening Ceremony of the İnegöl Hacı Sevim Yıldız Vocational Education Campus on 22 October 2016 illustrates both this theme of unity and the moral consistency on which it rests:

“We all witnessed how the values promoted by European states were trampled when a few thousand, even a few hundred refugees came to their doors. There are currently three million refugees in Türkiye; we did not cry out. So what did we say? Our doors are open to those people to whom barrel bombs and cluster bombs are being dropped. Why? We loved the created for the sake of the Creator. Therefore we could not leave these people to those bombs.”

By contrasting Türkiye’s stance with that of Europe, the phrase “to love the created for the sake of the Creator” reflects Türkiye’s moral approach. Erdoğan relates the act of embracing these values to the virtue of leadership itself. Thus, in this discourse, migration is not framed as a threat or burden, as it appears in the discourse of right-wing populist parties in the West, but rather as an expression of moral virtue.

As the discourse approaches the present, Erdoğan’s words at the World Human Rights Day - The Face of Brotherhood Program on 11 December 2024, “Those who wanted to deliberately send the muhacir to death have lost both in the elections and in the test of humanity,” reflect a significant aspect of his recent migration discourse. The phrase “test of humanity” provides an

ethical framework, while the emphasis on “losing in the elections” indicates its capacity to generate political consequences. In this way, President Erdoğan maintains the form of an exclusionary framework yet reverses its direction. Within this reversal, in his discourse, “them” are not the migrants, but those who act without mercy and conscience toward them. This discourse demonstrates that it is possible to construct a sense of “us” without excluding migrants, in which the side that wins the elections simultaneously represents the conscience of humanity. Ultimately, Erdoğan employs migration as a legitimizing instrument on both moral and political levels.

Building upon this value-oriented approach, Erdoğan’s statement at the Administrators Day Program on 7 January 2025, “We will not allow anyone to tarnish the stance we displayed at the cost of risking our political future in Türkiye’s most critical elections... For us, ensuring that our Syrian brothers can return to their homes in peace is both a humanitarian duty and a strategic priority in terms of regional stability... We will not make the mistake of sending anyone back by force,” illustrates how migration is integrated into a value-based political reasoning. The emphasis on “risking our political future” frames leadership as a moral stance that prioritizes doing what is right over pursuing short-term interests. In this sense, migration is positioned as a matter that bridges conscience with political competence. Through the expression “We will not send anyone back by force,” Erdoğan establishes a model of governance that is both compassionate and resolute, building legitimacy on remaining committed to moral principles. Thus, migration in Erdoğan’s discourse becomes not a crisis, but a point of intersection between moral leadership and administrative legitimacy.

4.1.4. Positioning Against the Opposition

This code encompasses the sections of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s migration discourse in which the opposition is positioned as a counterpoint, serving to consolidate his own political stance. The discourse operates through explicit references to the “CHP” or the “Main Opposition,” portraying the opposition’s approach to migration as inadequate in terms of national identity, historical responsibility, and political vision. Within this framework, migration emerges as a discursive field where the ideological and rhetorical boundaries between the government and the opposition become more pronounced.

In Erdoğan’s discourse, the opposition is often represented as a subject that is open to foreign influence, lacking historical consciousness, or guided by short term interests. His speech

at the AK Party Group Meeting on 30 January 2018 “At every opportunity, they spread sedition, saying ‘Why don’t the Syrians in our country fight to defend their homeland, while we are going there?’... Ey CHP, you would not understand this. You only act according to the lies prompted to you.” exemplifies this contrast. In this instance, Erdoğan characterizes the opposition as an actor open to external guidance, positioning his own stance in contrast as one grounded in genuine knowledge and national sensitivity.

Extending this critical stance toward the opposition, Erdoğan emphasizes similar themes in his speech at the AK Party Group Meeting on 5 February 2019, where he states, “We can only say shame on those who have become so alienated from their own country that they cannot understand that the struggle in Syria is inseparable from Türkiye’s own cause”. The emphasis on “becoming alienated from one’s country” situates the opposition as distant from national identity, while migration is, in this instance, associated with the ability to recognize the country’s regional responsibilities. Likewise, in his speech at the AK Party Extended Provincial Chairpersons Meeting on 5 September 2019, Erdoğan remarks, “What does the opposition say? As soon as we come to power, we will expel them... What kind of mindset is this? This is the mentality of mandate” that the notion of “mandate mentality” reinforces the image of an opposition estranged from national will. Through this contrast, the discourse presents its own position as that of an independent and responsible actor.

In his speech following the Cabinet Meeting on 9 December 2024, Erdoğan states, “The Main Opposition, whose policy on the Syrian crisis collapsed as of yesterday, is now attempting to create new grounds for exploitation through the oppressed Syrians, using an ugly and racist language,” thereby portraying the opposition not only as inadequate but also as representing an irresponsible and inconsistent political stance.

This line becomes even more evident in Erdoğan’s speech at the World Human Rights Day The Face of Brotherhood Program on 11 December 2024:

“Despite the Main Opposition in this country saying ‘We will expel you’... while the former chairman of the CHP tries to provoke our nation with Nazi like racist hate speech... merely to gain a few more votes in the elections, they have taken paths that do not align with our nation, our faith, or with who we are.”

By these words, Erdoğan reduces the opposition to a political stance that undermines social cohesion for the sake of electoral gain. Against this background, migration functions as an

instrument that differentiates a government committed to maintaining social solidarity from an opposition that renders politics a field of crisis.

The same oppositional tone is maintained in Erdoğan's speech following the Cabinet Meeting on 17 July 2025, where he says, "They are unaware of both the concept of nation and the notion of ummah... They are so lacking in discernment that they cannot comprehend how it is possible to defend the unity of the Turkish nation while also defending the universal brotherhood of Muslims." Through these words, Erdoğan presents the opposition not merely as a political rival but as an identity based other. By placing the concepts of "nation" and "ummah" side by side, he strengthens his discourse as the representative of both national and religious unity.

From an overall perspective, this code reveals that the debate surrounding migration ultimately revolves around the question of who genuinely represents the nation and bears social responsibility. Within this framework, Erdoğan's discourse, unlike the exclusionary line of right-wing populism in the West, excludes not the migrants but the political opponents who misinterpret the migration phenomenon. In this way, migration becomes a discursive axis through which the government positions itself as the bearer of historical consciousness, national unity, and political vision.

4.1.5. Voluntary Return

The "Voluntary Return" can be understood as a mode of articulation in Erdoğan's narrative on migration that foregrounds the idea of maintaining order and sustaining control. This discourse operates in conjunction with inclusive and belonging-oriented narratives such as "Religious Solidarity" and "Common History as Unity," yet differs from them in its focus on defining the direction and boundaries of migration. By simultaneously constructing the notions of "hospitality" and "return," Erdoğan establishes a balance in which migration is conceived not as a permanent condition but as a form of regulated temporality.

Erdoğan's statement at the Extended Provincial Chairpersons Meeting on 10 October 2019, "Let me underline once again; our plan is for everyone to be able to return to their own homes," exemplifies this sense of temporariness. At the same time, his continued emphasis on "we are the ensar" demonstrates that, in Erdoğan's discourse, migration acquires a dual structure, which

preserves a sense of unity while maintaining control. The discourse of hospitality legitimizes the presence of migrants, whereas the discourse of “return” functions to delimit that legitimacy.

This idea finds a clearer expression in Erdoğan’s later addresses. At the Global Refugee Forum on 17 December 2019, he states, “It is necessary to implement mechanisms that will keep refugees within their own territories and enable those in our country to return to their homelands,” a clear expression of this regulated perspective. Similarly, at the International Ombudsman Conference on 11 January 2023, Erdoğan notes, “As the security environment in northern Syria improves, the voluntary return of Syrians in our country is accelerating... To date, approximately 550 thousand refugees have returned to the areas we have cleared of terrorism and made safe”. These remarks reinforce the dimension of control and stability within the discourse. Migration, in this regard, is not treated as a matter of social solidarity but as an indicator of order. By sustaining both the language of “unity” and the idea of “return,” Erdoğan simultaneously constructs a sense of “us” that holds the community together while delineating its boundaries through the logic of return.

The speech delivered following the Cabinet Meeting on 9 December 2024 can be regarded as a systematic instance of this discourse:

“As Syria moves toward stability, İnşallah, voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustained returns will increase as well... We will manage the voluntary return process of the muhacir in a manner worthy of our history, our culture, and our exceptional thirteen-year hospitality. We will not allow anyone to tarnish this process.”

Ultimately, Erdoğan does not entirely abandon the expression “we are the ensar,” yet this time, being “ensar” signifies the ability to conclude hospitality while maintaining order. In this way, the migration discourse preserves its inclusive dimension while gradually settling into a framework that emphasizes control and delineates boundaries.

4.2. Theme 2: International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy

In this section, President Erdoğan’s migration discourse is analyzed in relation to the domain of foreign policy, where its strategic and discursive dimensions become visible. Considering the main research question, it is essential to analyze, based on the findings from the sample, Erdoğan’s approach to migration not merely as a matter of domestic politics but also as a phenomenon that defines Türkiye’s international position. Understanding this

approach is crucial for identifying how the AK Party's migration discourse differs from right-wing populist examples in the West. This differentiation becomes evident not only in the construction of an inclusive language of unity in domestic politics but also in Türkiye's positioning in foreign policy through notions of international responsibility, fair burden sharing, and diplomatic negotiation.

Right-wing populist discourses in the West typically define migration within the framework of crime, economic burden, and cultural threat. As De Genova (2002) points out, migrants are evaluated through a potential association of "illegality and criminality". This linkage produces a discursive institutionalization of exclusion by connecting migrants with crime and disorder. In the European context, as Karamanidou (2014) emphasizes, this process takes the form of the securitization of migration, through which migration becomes politicized as a "field of threat". The European Union's border policies and public narratives construct migration as a risk to be controlled, while simultaneously reinforcing the rise of right-wing populism (Karamanidou, 2014, 56).

In contrast to such exclusionary and security-oriented framings, Erdoğan's discourse diverges significantly from this Western paradigm. In the speeches evaluated within the scope of this study, migration is not presented as a danger stemming from migrants themselves but rather as a shared field of responsibility that necessitates collective governance. Yet, alongside this discourse of shared responsibility, migration also becomes politicized and transformed into a sphere of diplomatic negotiation, aimed at protecting or strengthening Türkiye's political position in the international arena. As observed in the first theme, while migration in domestic politics is discussed through the notions of solidarity, hospitality, and order, in this thematic axis of foreign policy, the same framework is constructed through the injustices of the international system, the lack of burden sharing, and Türkiye's struggle against these imbalances. Therefore, while Erdoğan's discourse shares the mobilizing language of populist politics, it defines Western actors as the "elite" and "them," framing the migration crisis as a result of an unjust global system and positioning himself alongside the migrants rather than excluding them. The analysis conducted under this theme further aims to reveal how Erdoğan presents migration as a discursive instrument within foreign policy discourse. For this purpose, the analysis proceeds through the following codes: "Burden-Sharing "Western-centered Values," "Call for International Justice," and "Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument".

4.2.1. Burden-Sharing

The code “Burden-Sharing” encompasses President Erdoğan’s narratives emphasizing that Western actors have failed to fulfill their responsibilities regarding migration and have left Türkiye without sufficient support. As discussed at the beginning of this theme, this discourse operates as a reversal of the securitized language of right-wing populism in the West, which frames migration as a “threat” and “burden”. On the other hand, in Erdoğan’s discourse, Türkiye is reconstructed as the actor that “carries the burden.” In contrast to right-wing populist discourses in the West, which typically depict migrants as an economic burden or a security threat, Erdoğan’s discourse shifts the direction of this framing by redefining the “burden” not as the presence of migrants but as the unfulfilled financial commitments of Western states. This logic reflects Laclau and Mouffe’s view that meaning is produced through antagonistic relations, where “us” represents Türkiye, fulfilling its obligations in practice, and “them” refers to the West, failing to keep its promises.

Erdoğan’s speech at the Islahiye Tent City on 7 October 2014 represents a significant example of this discursive structure. With remarks such as “The West, unfortunately, remains a spectator... Europe has so far accepted only 130 thousand Syrian refugees... We are hosting more than one and a half million of our brothers,” he underscores the passivity of the West. He further highlights that the migration burden is largely shouldered by Türkiye, stating, “Unfortunately, the support we have received from the world has not even reached 200 million dollars. Almost all the assistance we provide comes from our own resources for your sake.” Referring to the saying “Hayrun nas men yenfeun nas, this is the measure,” (meaning “the best of people are those who benefit others”) Erdoğan defines Türkiye’s responsible stance through action. This expression functions not merely as a religious reminder but as a principle that highlights Türkiye’s international role within Erdoğan’s discourse. In this construction, “us” represents those who, despite challenges, act for the benefit of others, whereas “them” refers to those who fail to contribute to this effort.

Indeed, Erdoğan’s speech at the United Nations Refugee Summit on 20 September 2016 carries this narrative into the institutional sphere. Through his statement that “without fair burden sharing, it will not be possible to resolve the refugee problem,” Erdoğan underscores the inadequacy of the West while framing Türkiye as the actor that bears the burden alone. This stance is further reflected in his speech at the conference, Türkiye’s Entrepreneurial Vision for Peace in the Middle East, held in Bahrain on 13 February 2017. By stating “We have spent 25 billion dollars, they promised 3 billion euros; did it arrive? No, it did not,” Erdoğan reminds his

audience of the European Union's unfulfilled commitments and emphasizes that burden sharing remains merely rhetorical. The central point is that the problem lies not in the lack of solidarity with Europe but in the failure to fulfill concrete commitments. In this way, Türkiye's efforts to carry the burden in practice are made visible, while the West's unfulfilled responsibilities are simultaneously highlighted.

In another example, Erdoğan's speech at the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Budapest Process in 2019, this opposition is conveyed through a political and strategic tone. His statement "if a new wave of migration occurs, we will no longer be able to shoulder it alone" portrays the West's irresponsibility not only as a moral shortcoming but also as a source of regional instability. This perspective is further evident in his speech at the Opening of the 3rd Legislative Year of the 27th Term of the Grand National Assembly on 1 October 2019, where Erdoğan remarks that "by placing the burden of terrorism and refugees on our shoulders, they are practically trying to bring us to our knees," indicating that the critique extends into the sphere of international sovereignty. At this point, the failure to share the burden is not merely represented as an injustice but as a "political scheme" (oyun) that threatens Türkiye's independence. Erdoğan's statement during the Istanbul Members of Parliament Meeting on 29 February 2020, "Biz kendi göbeğimizi kendimiz kesmeye mahkumuz" (we are compelled to act entirely on our own), reinforces the perception that Türkiye is forced to manage the migration process without reliance on external support.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Erdoğan's discourse constructs "us" as Türkiye, the actor that shoulders the burden and maintains order, whereas "them" refers to those who make promises but fail to fulfill them, thereby disrupting the balance of the system. Ultimately, Erdoğan's rhetoric of "burden sharing," although it may superficially appear to frame migrants as a "burden," diverges from the exclusionary and security-oriented logic of right-wing populism in the West. Through the narrative of assuming the migration burden and fulfilling responsibility, migration is transformed into a political instrument that strengthens Türkiye's position in relation to the West. By identifying "us" with the victims, Erdoğan establishes a claim to global moral representation, while "them" designates self-interested actors who fail to assume responsibility and do not keep their word. Within this framework, migration becomes not merely a matter of foreign policy but also a practice through which Türkiye redefines its place within the international discursive arena.

4.2.2. Western-centered Values

In President Erdoğan's discourse, the West's approach to the migration crisis is addressed not only through the axis of financial burden sharing but also as a contradiction grounded in values. This contradiction is constructed around the notion that although the West frequently refers to principles such as "human rights," "democracy," and "justice," it often fails to uphold these very principles when it comes to migrants. Erdoğan's statement at the 3rd International Ombudsman Symposium on 16 September 2015, "Western countries cannot simply turn their backs on millions struggling to survive. Any other attitude would mean a betrayal of the values on which the West, and particularly the European Union, was founded" constitutes a key line of this discourse. Through this statement, the West is represented as a subject incapable of upholding its own foundational values.

A similar criticism is evident in his speech at the TÜGİK General Assembly on 11 February 2016, Erdoğan characterizes Europe's policies toward refugees as "shameful practices," ranging from closing borders with barbed wire to using violence against refugees. As Betz (1994, p. 106) emphasizes, the reduction of migration in Europe to a matter of "security" has led the West to reconfigure the political field by positioning migration as a threat. Erdoğan, likewise, questions the transformation of the migration crisis from a humanitarian concern into a security-oriented problem by the West. Consequently, the security-oriented approach identified by Betz in his critique of right-wing populist movements in Europe is recontextualized in Erdoğan's discourse as a critical element directed toward the West, serving as a discursive ground on which the unjust position of migration within the Western system is questioned. At another point in the speech, his remark "Just a few months ago, those who pretended to play on the highway with a little Syrian girl for PR purposes" provides an illustrative example of this critique, suggesting that humanitarian values in the West have been reduced to an instrument of image. From the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony, this discourse signifies a challenge to the West's dominance over the meaning of "humanity." Erdoğan positions the West as a false defender of values. In this regard, his speech at the conference Türkiye's Entrepreneurial Vision for Peace in the Middle East, held in Bahrain on 13 February 2017, represents a continuation of this framework. With the words "The West avoids taking responsibility, building barbed wire walls... Are these people not human? Where is our Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where is conscience?". Erdoğan invokes Europe's own normative foundations and the international human rights regime. Through this

stance, the West is judged by the very principles it claims to uphold, transforming its image from a defender of human rights into their violator.

In his speech at the AK Party Group Meeting on March 11, 2020, Erdoğan transforms this theme into a broader critique of civilization through the statement “Europe is destroying its own values with its own hands and preparing its own demise”. This expression implies that the West is in a state of dissolution not only in its migration policies but also in the practical implementation of its value discourses. The same line of argument is also presented on an international level in his statement in the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2020: “Countries like Türkiye, hosting the largest number of refugees in the world today, are saving the dignity of all humanity through their sacrifices. In contrast, some states, including some European countries, are unfortunately violating the rights of refugees and migrants.” The phrase *saving the dignity of humanity* positions Türkiye not only as an actor that assists victims but also as one that bears the moral burden of the international community. In doing so, it conveys the message that Türkiye shoulders humanitarian responsibility the West has failed to uphold. The statement expressed during the Cabinet Meeting on August 19, 2021, “Europe... cannot remain outside this problem by harshly closing its borders... it is not only violating international law but also turning its back on humanitarian values,” also represents a continuation of the same discourse. Ultimately, it defines the West as an actor evading responsibility and reinforces once again the moral superiority of Türkiye through this contrast.

The speech given at the International Ombudsman Conference on January 11, 2023, illustrates this discourse in its most coherent form. Erdoğan emphasizes that the human rights narrative has become one of the most discussed yet least practiced areas globally, and asserts that the West has undermined its own value system through acts of “cultural racism,” “Islamophobia,” and “xenophobia”. The statement, “For these groups of people, sometimes marginalized by the media, sometimes by politicians, and sometimes by the state itself, it is becoming increasingly difficult to exercise the rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” indicates that the West’s claim to universal values has now lost its substantive content.

Building on the previous code, Erdoğan’s discourse defines the West as an actor that fails to fulfill its financial commitments, while also interpreting this very failure as evidence of the collapse of the West’s own value system. Thus, the critiques grounded in “financial burden-sharing” and “value-oriented” considerations converge within the same field of hegemonic struggle. The idea of Western superiority is reversed on both moral and practical levels.

Consequently, this code reveals a strategy in Erdoğan's discourse that questions Western values through the contradictions evident in the West's actions regarding migration. Unlike the populist right, this approach targets Western discourse rather than migrants. By redefining Western concepts of values, Erdoğan positions Türkiye as the bearer and protector of these values.

4.2.3. Call for International Justice

In Erdoğan's discourse on migration, the code "Call for International Justice" represents a normative approach that emphasizes the need to construct the international system on the principles of justice and equitable burden sharing. Throughout his speeches, Erdoğan frames migration not merely as a security or economic issue, but as a concrete manifestation of global injustices and structural imbalances. In this regard, he criticizes the unjust and self-interested attitudes of the international community toward migration crises, and within this framework, the phrase *the world is bigger than five* functions as a moral assertion that extends Türkiye's critique of global inequality into the field of migration governance.

In his speech at the AFAD 22 Logistics Centers Joint Opening Ceremony on February 18, 2015, President Erdoğan emphasizes that the humanitarian crisis in Syria constitutes not merely a regional issue but a sphere of global responsibility. By stating that "the moral responsibility (vebal) of the 350,000 people who died in Syria belongs to those who have remained silent toward this oppression," Erdoğan presents the migration crisis as a consequence of the indifference of the international governance arena. The expression "the world is bigger than five," employed in this context, becomes a normative critique of the United Nations system's inadequacy in addressing migration and humanitarian crises. In this sense, Erdoğan's discourse, situated within a context in which Türkiye bears the burden of hosting millions of migrants almost single-handedly, articulates a call for justice and equality addressed to the international community. In this sense, Erdoğan's discourse, shaped by the setting of Türkiye's almost single-handed responsibility for hosting millions of migrants, conveys a call for justice and equality directed toward the international community.

One of the most prominent examples where this call for justice is articulated directly through the phenomenon of migration can be found in Erdoğan's speech at the Dinner in Honor of Guest Ministers and Heads of Delegation of the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Budapest Process, delivered on February 19, 2019. Stating that "addressing the matter of migration and

refugees merely from a security perspective is a reductionist approach” he criticizes the West’s policies that confine the migration to a matter of border security. While emphasizing that higher walls and barbed wires do not offer a real solution, Erdoğan defines migration as both a humanitarian and political issue and reminds the international community of its moral responsibility by stating, “Migration is a humanitarian and political issue that also has a security dimension. At its core lie the absence of justice and the failure of empathy.”

This rhetorical framework is further reinforced in Erdoğan’s address at the Global Refugee Forum on December 17, 2019. By stating that “if the blood of children killed in Syria were oil, the world would have intervened in an instant,” Erdoğan criticizes the selective humanitarianism of the international community. This statement exposes the indifference and self-interested attitudes that shape international responses to migration and migration crises. In this context, Erdoğan’s rhetoric aligns the call for international justice with an appeal to conscience, emphasizing Türkiye’s disproportionate burden in hosting refugees while drawing public attention to the relationship between global inequality, injustice, and migration.

Ultimately, Erdoğan’s discourse of the “Call for International Justice,” while rhetorically grounded in a populist tone that reflects the claim of being the “voice of the oppressed against the powerful,” fundamentally diverges from Western right-wing populism in its content. Whereas right-wing populist actors in the West frame migration as a phenomenon that threatens cultural homogeneity and therefore support reinforced national borders, Erdoğan conceptualizes migration as a manifestation of global injustice and locates the solution not in building higher walls but in transforming the international system itself.

In the subsequent period, a noticeable decline can be observed in the salience of references within Erdoğan’s speeches that directly refer to the “Call for International Justice” in the context of migration. This indicates that the justice-oriented narrative grounded in migration is expressed in a more limited manner compared to the previous phase. The literature suggests that during this period, Türkiye’s migration policies became increasingly shaped by political considerations, reflecting a growing pragmatism and a shift toward security-centered priorities (Kadkoy, 2025; Geyik Yıldırım, 2023, 198). In parallel with this rhetorical shift, the literature indicates that the adoption of a more restrictive approach to migration governance became evident as a response to increasing internal and external pressures. Studies highlight that, since early 2020, the opening of Türkiye’s borders to Europe, the strengthening of border security, the expansion of removal center capacities, and the implementation of voluntary return projects have all reflected this trend (Avyüzer Zobar, 2021, 26; Çataklı, 2024, 167–168). In this context,

the finding within the analysis that Erdoğan's call for international justice through migration has declined appears to align with the literature (Özbey, 2022, p. 735), suggesting that this tendency may have been constrained for strategic and political reasons as international normative priorities have been replaced by practical concerns such as Türkiye's internal and border security, political pragmatism, and public pressure.

4.2.4. Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument

In President Erdoğan's discourse on migration, the notion of "migration as an international diplomatic instrument" positions migration as one of Türkiye's key tools of negotiation. Within this discourse, migration is neither merely a component of domestic politics nor a passively assumed burden. Rather, it is employed as an active international diplomatic instrument that enables Türkiye to assert its agency and strengthen its position as an autonomous actor in the international arena. Thus, migration, as conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe, can be understood as a hegemonic field of meaning where different demands are articulated. Within this code, Erdoğan's discourse differs from right-wing populism in the West by presenting migrants not as a threat but as part of diplomacy. The discourse is not exclusionary toward migrants but is shaped by a stance that is sometimes negotiative and sometimes oppositional toward the West, which refuses to share Türkiye's burden and remains reluctant to accept migrants.

One of the early examples of this line of discourse can be found in Erdoğan's speech at the KADEM Justice and Women Congress on November 25, 2016. In this speech, Erdoğan states, "We are the ones feeding 3 million, 3.5 million refugees in this country... You cried out when 50,000 refugees reached Kapıkule... Look, if you go any further, these border gates will be opened" clearly illustrating that migration operates as an instrument of negotiation within a framework of mutual obligations. The purpose of this discourse is to delineate a political boundary against Europe's efforts to turn Türkiye into a *refugee barrier*. A similar message is conveyed in Erdoğan's speech at the AK Party Extended Provincial Heads Meeting on September 5, 2019:

"If this continues, we may have no choice but to open the gates, we may have to open them. Either you provide support, or you do not; but we have endured this burden up to a point, and we still are. Are we the only ones expected to carry it? We will not allow ourselves to be complicit in such oppression against these people. Let the others see what it means to shoulder this responsibility. When it comes to sharing the burden of the refugees we are hosting, above all with the European Union, let me be clear: we have not received the necessary support from the international

community, and we may have to act accordingly to obtain it. Of course, until these matters are resolved, we will continue our assistance.”

This statement reframes migration not as a threat but as a call for burden-sharing by functioning as a strategic discursive maneuver aimed at exposing the West’s indifference. Building upon this strategic discursive maneuver, Erdoğan frames the lack of financial support as a substantial political and practical burden and signals the possibility of implementing concrete countermeasures if this burden continues to be shouldered unilaterally. At the same time, the statements “we have endured this burden up to a point” and “we will continue our assistance” deliver a dual message. While the former underscores the limits of patience to increase pressure on the counterpart, the latter shows its domestic audience that the government intends to maintain its support.

This instrumentalization of migration becomes even more explicit in Erdoğan’s speech at the Extended Provincial Chairs Meeting on October 10, 2019, where the strategy is directly framed within the context of negotiations with the European Union: “Ey European Union, pull yourselves together... We may well open the gates and send you the 3.6 million refugees”. This discourse demonstrates that migration has been transformed into a concrete instrument of diplomatic pressure within Türkiye’s foreign policy. On the other hand, Erdoğan underscores Türkiye’s reliance on its own capacity by stating, “We have not managed this by taking anything from you. We spent 40 billion dollars ourselves”. Erdoğan characterizes “us” as an actor that should not be treated as merely a border guard, while defining “them” as insincere actors who fail to fulfill their obligations. In this way, migration in Erdoğan’s discourse emerges as both a site of foreign policy negotiation and a demonstration of national pride and strength.

The most critical point in this trajectory can be observed in Erdoğan’s speech at the Istanbul Members of Parliament Meeting on February 29, 2020 that Erdoğan states, “What did we say months ago? If this continues, we will have no choice but to open the gates... And what did we do yesterday? We opened the gates”. This marks a moment when rhetoric is explicitly turned into action. The statements “Around 18,000 have now pushed through the gates” and “We will not be closing these gates from now on” illustrate that Türkiye’s capability to control migration has been asserted while simultaneously serving as a message to the international community. At this point, as Avyüzer Zobar (2021) defines it, migration functions not only as a result of “exceeding carrying capacity” but also as a form of “strategic signaling”. In this context, Erdoğan’s statement *“If you are honest and sincere, you will share the burden. If you don’t, we will open the gates”* most directly reveals the bargaining power of migration. Türkiye is no

longer positioning itself as a passive “receiver” within the international system, but rather seeks to redefine itself as an active, agenda-setting actor.

In the AK Party Group Meeting speech dated 11 March 2020, this strategy is also articulated within a clear diplomatic framework. Erdoğan, by stating “Following the increase in attacks on our soldiers, we decided not to prevent the refugees who want to go to Europe,” frames migration in foreign policy as a form of “controlled permeability on borders” managed by Türkiye. Thus, the expression “we fed and housed them for 9 years... now they want to go to Europe, and we are not forcibly blocking their way” combines messages that emphasize both the necessity of burden-sharing and the potential consequences if this burden is not shared. At this juncture, unlike Western right-wing populist discourses, Erdoğan asserts power against the West not by “sending migrants back,” but through “the way migration is managed”. In this context, the rhetoric of opening the borders and sending refugees functions not as an act of exclusion of migrants, but as a tool for diplomatic negotiation.

The Cabinet Meeting speech delivered on 19 August 2021 marks the discursive boundary of this political trajectory. The statement “Türkiye has no duty, responsibility, or obligation to be Europe’s refugee warehouse” reflects a shift in which migration is redefined through the lens of national border control. This transformation corresponds with the definition of “migration diplomacy” outlined by Özdal and Argalı (2023), where migration is flexibly employed both as an instrument of foreign policy pressure and as a security-oriented instrument of domestic policy.

In his Cabinet Meeting speech on 9 December 2024, Erdoğan’s statement that “Türkiye has, from the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, fulfilled the requirements of good neighborly relations and of being a great power” conveys the current stage of this multi-layered discourse. With the resolution of the Syrian migration crisis and the collapse of the Assad regime, President Erdoğan no longer presents migration as a matter of negotiation, but rather frames it as part of a diplomatic process that has demonstrated Türkiye’s role as an order-setting actor in the region throughout the crisis. By reiterating that “Türkiye has, from the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, fulfilled the requirements of good neighborly relations and of being a great power,” Erdoğan transforms the issue of migration into a direct reflection of foreign policy principles. This discourse marks a departure from the pragmatic tone of the 2016–2020 “we will open the gates” approach, aiming instead to position Türkiye as an order-setting actor in the region through its management of the migration process.

As a final point, “Migration as an International Diplomatic Instrument” signifies the stage at which the politicization of migration in Erdoğan’s discourse reaches the international sphere. This discourse diverges from the logic of the right-wing populist “us versus them” dichotomy in the West, where the political is constituted by closing borders as a response to perceived threats against the nation. In contrast, Erdoğan constructs the political through the act of opening borders, presenting migration as a field through which sovereign agency is exercised. Therefore, migration becomes not a vehicle of exclusion driven by fear, but an instrument of a diplomatic subject shaped through inclusion. While Western discourse frames migrants as threats, burdens, or as “them,” Erdoğan’s discourse incorporates migrants into “us”. Within this framework, “us” functions as the actor that not only manages migration but also reconfigures the identity of migrants by integrating them into its collective unity. In contrast, “them” refers to Western actors who neglect both humanitarian and political responsibilities. Thus, the “us versus them” division remains central to Erdoğan’s discourse, yet it is not directed against migrants, but against those who exclude them. This discursive structure can be interpreted through Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of hegemonic articulation, whereby notions such as humanity, conscience, responsibility, and solidarity, often associated with Western-centric discourse, are redefined through their alignment with Türkiye’s political stance. In this way, Erdoğan reframes migration as a domain of political identity that includes migrants while simultaneously reinforcing Türkiye’s international role. His discourse produces a populist “us versus them” division, but one constructed through inclusion rather than exclusion, clearly distinguishing it from the exclusionary logic of right-wing populism.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the AK Party's discourse on migration represents a distinct Turkish variation that departs from the exclusionary, anti-migrant rhetoric of right-wing populism. Within the scope of the study, the relationship between right-wing populism and migration was examined in the context of Türkiye, with a specific focus on the AK Party. In addition to evaluating migration-related discourses in Türkiye through the lens of right-wing populism, the analysis also investigates how Syrian migrants in Türkiye are discursively positioned. In the relevant literature, despite the emphasis on the right-wing populist character of the AK Party, its discourse appears to highlight notions of *unity* and *solidarity* rather than exclusion toward migrants. In this context, migrants are redefined within a framework of social cohesion. In this sense, the point of departure for this study is the examination of the AK Party's inclusive discourse toward Syrian migrants, despite its frequent characterization as a right-wing populist actor in the literature. Consequently, the research offers an alternative perspective to studies on the relationship between migration and populism and aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the diverse manifestations of populist politics.

In this regard, the study is structured around two main research questions. First, drawing on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's discourse on migration, it examines how Syrian migrants are positioned within the populist division between "us versus them". Second, it explores how these discourses differ from those of Western right-wing populist actors regarding migration.

In the study, the distinctive features of populism and right-wing populism are examined within a conceptual framework, with particular attention to their flexible structures and discursive patterns. This conceptual discussion is supported by the existing literature, showing that populism is not an independent ideology but can easily articulate different ideological orientations. This flexibility allows populism to take different forms across ideological contexts, particularly within right-wing politics. In this regard, the literature shows that right-wing populism advances a discourse that promotes native identity and traditional values while reinforcing various dichotomies through perceptions of cultural fear and threat. This discourse is typically constructed around perceived or potential dangers to national unity and

homogeneity, and the populist idea of social cohesion is therefore built through the exclusion of those identified as the “them”.

The construction of the other in populist rhetoric is often manifested through exclusionary and threat-oriented narratives targeting migrants, revealing how migration is instrumentalized in the political arena. In this ideological frame, themes such as “border protection,” “threats to national identity,” and “economic burden” function as discursive practices that reinforce anti-migrant sentiments on cultural, ideological, and economic grounds. These strategies are widely employed by European right-wing populist parties, drawing on public fears and identity crises. Considering these dynamics, the migrant figure is reduced to issues of social and legal integration and portrayed as a threat to others that radical right-wing politics blame for not being native through the politicization of migration.

In this respect, the case of Türkiye diverges from the exclusionary migration narratives observed in Western right-wing populism. In President Erdoğan’s discourse, migration is defined not through fear but through notions of conscience and morality. Although migration is employed in an inclusive rather than exclusionary manner, it nonetheless plays a significant role in the production of political legitimacy. Accordingly, this study examines how the AK Party’s discourse on migration differs from that of right-wing populist parties and analyzes how this difference is constructed at the level of political discourse. Within this framework, the analysis is grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, which constitutes the theoretical foundation of the study, and the AK Party’s migration discourse is examined through thematic analysis conducted within this theoretical perspective. In doing so, the study reveals the themes around which the discourse is shaped and how it functions in the production of political meaning. The thematic analysis method employed in this research goes beyond a descriptive classification of data and aims to make the processes of discursive meaning-making visible. The analysis of President Erdoğan’s speeches published on the official website of the Presidency allows an examination of how his discourse is constructed within both domestic and foreign policy contexts. Within this methodological framework, thematic analysis identifies nodes of conceptual density in the texts and demonstrates the ways in which the phenomenon of “Syrian migrants” is articulated around specific chains of meaning within political discourse. The analysis also examines the nature of the discursive relations among these themes. At this stage, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory provided a deeper theoretical lens through which the findings derived from the thematic analysis were interpreted.

In line with Laclau and Mouffe’s conceptualization, Erdoğan’s discourse on migrants

reconstructs the meaning of migration across domestic and foreign policy contexts. In this respect, the themes and codes identified in the study function as nodal points through which meaning is temporarily fixed within the empty signifier. Through these nodal points, the notions of “Syrian migrants” and “migration” are redefined within various discursive chains such as humanitarian responsibility, brotherhood, national and religious unity, burden sharing, and diplomatic engagement. The nine codes identified in the analysis reveal how the empty signifier of “Syrian migrants” is fixed in Erdoğan’s discourse and what functions it assumes across different contexts. Through these themes and codes, Erdoğan develops a dual discourse addressing both domestic and international audiences, where he reinforces social legitimacy internally through values such as “brotherhood” and “hospitality” while redefining Türkiye’s international position through references to “burden sharing,” “call for justice,” and “negotiation”. In line with Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony, this discourse centralizes the political meaning of migration along a single axis by excluding alternative possibilities of signification. Consequently, “Syrian migrants” functions as an empty signifier, constituting a hegemonic field in Erdoğan’s discourse that serves as a reconstruction of both national identity and the sphere of foreign policy maneuvering.

In light of the analytical relationship between the research questions, the evaluation focused on two main themes: “Domestic Political Context Through Religious National Values” and “International Political Context Through Responsibility and Diplomacy”. Therefore, the mutual reinforcing structure of the codes examined under these themes enabled a more comprehensive interpretation of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s discourse on Syrian migrants and the narratives derived from it, within a right-wing populist framework.

Building on the findings of the first theme, Erdoğan’s discourse on migration emerges not merely as a political stance but as a mechanism for generating social consent. The inclusionary narratives that incorporate Syrian migrants into us are articulated through civilizational and religious references, framed by notions of historical belonging and shared identity, while this inclusive language simultaneously functions as a tool for producing domestic political legitimacy. Furthermore, one of the significant findings of the analysis is that Erdoğan’s discourse positions the main opposition party as them. Erdoğan establishes this positioning through his emphasis on the opposition’s lack of ensar consciousness and its perceived moral deficiency. Overall, the first theme reveals discursive strategies that construct a moral sense of “us,” demonstrating how the perception of Syrian migrants in Türkiye and the issue of migration more broadly have been employed as instruments for producing political legitimacy in domestic politics. Within this populist division of “us versus them,” the opposition itself is

pointed to as the internal “them”. Considering the tone of Erdoğan’s rhetoric and accusations toward the opposition, this internalization of the “them” can also be understood as the construction of an “internal enemy”. Indeed, in Erdoğan’s speech, the opposition is portrayed as standing against the will of the people, detached from national values, and concerned solely with its own political interests, whereas Erdoğan presents himself as the true voice of the people, embracing their values and, when necessary, risking his own political future.

The second dimension of the analysis reveals how these discourses are represented in the context of foreign policy. Within this framework, Erdoğan’s rhetoric criticizes European countries for their reluctance to share the burden and their deliberate neglect in putting Western values into practice toward Syrian migrants. The value-oriented tone observed in the first theme also manifests itself in this section, yet the values grounded in this discourse are those of the West. Erdoğan draws attention to the contradiction between Europe’s founding principles and its migration policies, a contradiction that also functions as a site of diplomatic negotiation in the international arena. The discourse surrounding Türkiye’s decision to open its borders and allow millions of Syrian migrants to move toward Europe represents a critical point in this discourse. Erdoğan’s statements indicate that migration is positioned as a means of strengthening Türkiye’s diplomatic autonomy and bargaining capacity. In this context, Europe emerges as one another “them” and, through the recurring emphasis on political schemes directed against Türkiye, this rhetoric further constructs the image of an external enemy.

At the intersection of both themes and the literature review conducted within the study, it becomes evident that Erdoğan’s discourse constructs a “us versus them” framework aligned with the discursive structure of right-wing populism. Yet, even the analysis within the study demonstrates that the AK Party’s discourse produces a division between “us” and “them,” this division is not based on ethnic or cultural exclusion but is instead constructed through moral boundaries. In this moral framing, the us is represented as a compassionate, faithful, and conscientious community, while “them” appears to represent actors who lack these values and remain indifferent or insensitive. Since migration is associated with a sense of “moral righteousness,” Erdoğan’s discourse on migration can be seen as maintaining the formal logic of right-wing populism, though its content is structured around “responsibility” rather than “threat”. Yet, unlike right-wing populist examples in Europe, this dichotomy differs in that it does not categorize migrants as “them,” instead positions the actors who engage in exclusionary discourses and practices toward migrants as them. In this sense, the dichotomy appears to operate in reverse in Türkiye’s political landscape.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the dichotomous opposition inherent in

populism has been reframed within the context of migration discourse in Türkiye. Migration is articulated through a language of moral responsibility and conscience, rather than fear or hostility. This reframing reveals how the moral dimension of political discourse reshapes the populist logic of exclusion into one of ethical positioning. In doing so, the analysis highlights that right-wing populism may function as a source of political legitimacy through moral inclusivity. The findings also show that migration serves not merely as a tool for constructing the other, but as a mechanism for producing a collective sense of unity. Ultimately, this research contributes to the intersectional discussion of populism and migration, illustrating that right-wing populism is not a fixed or universal form of exclusion, but a discourse that adapts to distinct socio-political contexts. In this regard, the Türkiye case exemplifies how populism can take shape differently depending on its moral and political framing.



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APPENDİX 1: LIST OF SAMPLED SPEECHES BY PRESIDENT ERDOĞAN

Date	Headline
7.10.2014	İslahiye'de Bulunan Çadırkent'te Yaptıkları Konuşma
18.02.2015	AFAD, 22 Lojistik Merkez Toplu Açılış Töreni'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma
21.06.2015	Türkiye İhracatçılar Meclisi 22. Olağan Genel Kurulu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
16.09.2015	3. Uluslararası Ombudsmanlık Sempozyumu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
11.02.2016	TÜGİK Genel Kurulu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
6.04.2016	23. Muhtarlar Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
20.09.2016	Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Zirvesi'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma
29.09.2016	27. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
22.10.2016	İnegöl Hacı Sevim Yıldız Mesleki Eğitim Kampüsü'nün Açılış Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma
25.11.2016	KADEM Adalet Ve Kadın Kongresinde Yaptıkları Konuşma
13.02.2017	Bahreyn'de “Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu'da Barışa Yönelik Girişimci Vizyonu” Konulu Konferansında Yaptıkları Konuşma
2.03.2017	4. Uluslararası Ombudsmanlık Sempozyumunda Yaptıkları Konuşma
30.01.2018	AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
8.02.2018	45. Muhtarlar Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
10.04.2018	TİKA Koordinatörlerini Kabulünde Yaptıkları Konuşma
2.10.2018	AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
5.02.2019	AK Parti Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
19.02.2019	Budapeşte Süreci 6. Bakanlar Konferansı Konuk Bakan ve Heyet Başkanları Onuruna Akşam Yemeğinde Yaptıkları Konuşma

19.06.2019	Sancaktepe Toplu Açılış Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma
5.09.2019	Ak Parti Genişletilmiş İl Başkanları Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
1.10.2019	TBMM 27. Dönem 3. Yasama Yılı Açış Konuşması
10.10.2019	Genişletilmiş İl Başkanları Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma
17.12.2019	Küresel Mülteci Forumu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
29.02.2020	İstanbul Milletvekilleri Buluşmasında Yaptıkları Konuşma
11.03.2020	AK Parti Grup Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
22.09.2020	BM Genel Kurulu'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
19.08.2021	Kabine Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptıkları Konuşma
11.10.2021	Kabine Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptıkları Konuşma
15.03.2022	Uluslararası İyilik Ödülleri Töreni'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma
19.05.2022	Kütüphane Söyleşileri - Gençlerle Buluşma Programı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
11.01.2023	Uluslararası Ombudsmanlık Konferansı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
9.12.2024	Kabine Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptıkları Konuşma
11.12.2024	Dünya İnsan Hakları Günü Kardeşliğin Yüzü Programı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
7.01.2025	İdareciler Günü Programı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma
17.07.2025	Kabine Toplantısı'nın Ardından Yaptıkları Konuşma