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İYİ PARTY NATIONALISM

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İYİ PARTY NATIONALISM, 2017-2024

A Master's Thesis

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*To my two grandmothers, who were made to endure so much by a male world, yet
survived and built all of us a life*



İYİ PARTY NATIONALISM, 2017-2024

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
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September 2024

İYİ PARTY NATIONALISM, 2017-2024
By Reyhan Cemre Karaçalık

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Political Science and Public Administration.

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ABSTRACT

İYİ PARTY NATIONALISM, 2017-2024

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This thesis examines the political position of the İYİ Party, with a particular focus on its nationalism. It first covers the political trajectory of the party from its establishment in 2017 to the end of its founding leader, Meral Akşener's tenure in 2024, and addresses the discussions surrounding its ideological stance during this period. Then, through semi-structured interviews with ten party elites conducted in April 2024, supplemented by party documents and official statements, this research examines how these elites perceive their party's position at the end of its founding phase. Based on this, the thesis explores where the İYİ Party can be located within the broader context of nationalist ideology in Turkey and argues that, despite frequent comparisons with the MHP, the İYİ Party aligns with official nationalism and upholds the Republican legacy in opposition to the 'destructive' Islamist authoritarianism of the AK Party over the past two decades. Their adherence to official nationalist ideology is evident across various policy areas, serving both as a source of moderation and as a basis for fear and suspicion towards minorities, external powers, their perceived internal agents, and refugees—driven by the party's fixation on cultural unity and territorial integrity, which is itself rooted in official nationalism. Even in its seemingly progressive stance on women's rights, the İYİ

Party reveals a complex interplay of progressive and traditional views. Overall, these dilemmas and contradictions in the party's nationalist ideology continue to raise questions about its democratic and moderate image.

Keywords: İYİ Party, Political Elite, Political Parties, Turkish Nationalism, Turkish Politics



ÖZET

İYİ PARTİ MİLLİYETÇİLİĞİ, 2017-2024

Karaçalık, Reyhan Cemre

Yüksek Lisans, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

Tez Danışmanı: Doçent. Dr. İhsan İlker Aytürk

Eylül, 2024

Bu tez, İYİ Parti'nin siyasi konumunu, özellikle milliyetçiliğine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Tezde, ilk olarak partinin 2017'deki kuruluşu ile 2024 yılında kurucu lideri Meral Akşener'in görevden ayrılması arasında geçen sürede yaşadığı siyasi gelişmeler incelenmiş ve bu süreçte partinin milliyetçi ideolojisi hakkında yapılan tartışmalara değinilmiştir. Ardından 2024 yılı Nisan ayında on parti elitiyle gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ile parti belgeleri ve resmi açıklamalar üzerinden parti elitlerinin kurucu dönemin sonunda partinin pozisyonunu nasıl algıladıkları ve tanımladıklarını analiz edilmiştir. İYİ Parti'nin Türkiye'deki milliyetçi gelenek bağlamında nerede konumlanabileceğini araştıran bu tez, partinin sıklıkla MHP ile karşılaştırılmasına rağmen, resmi milliyetçilikle aynı çizgide olduğunu ve AK Parti'nin son yirmi yıldaki 'yıkıcı' İslamcı otoriterliğine karşı Cumhuriyet mirasını savunduğunu iddia etmektedir. Partinin resmi milliyetçi ideolojiye olan bağlılığını çeşitli politika alanlarında gözlemlemek mümkündür. Buna göre, bu milliyetçilik çizgisi bir yandan partinin ılımlılığının kaynağı olarak etkili olurken, diğer yandan toprak bütünlüğü ve kültürel birlik konularında aşırı hassasiyet göstermeye neden olmuş; bu durum azınlıklara, dış güçlere, onların ülke içindeki 'işbirlikçilerine' ve mültecilere karşı korku ve şüphelerinin temelini oluşturmuştur. Partinin dışarıdan en ilerici görüldüğü konu olan kadın haklarında

bile parti elitlerinin sözlerinde ilerici ve geleneksel görüşleri harmanlayan karmaşık bir etkileşim görülmektedir. Partinin milliyetçi ideolojisindeki bu ikilemler ve çelişkiler, sunulan demokratik ve ılımlı imaj hakkında soru işaretleri ve yeni tartışmalar yaratmaya devam etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İYİ Parti, Siyasi Elitler, Siyasi Partiler, Türk Milliyetçiliği, Türkiye Siyaseti



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As one –if not the most significant- of the founding principles of the Turkish Republic, nationalism has enjoyed a hegemonic status in the country’s political and social landscape over the last century, consolidated as a fundamental value that transcends ideological differences. As Bora (2001) notes, with the exception of a few small circles adhering to socialist internationalism or radical Islamism, all political perspectives in Turkey, albeit to varying degrees, embrace nationalism in their ideology. Nevertheless, despite this broad consensus, it was the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Action Party - MHP) that has distinguished itself with its explicit and unabashed nationalist rhetoric and program over the past five decades, establishing its dominance over the country’s nationalist politics. Although the MHP has faced divisions and turmoil over the years, most notably with the split of the *Büyük Birlik Partisi* (Great Unity Party - BBP) in 1993, it has managed to maintain a united front and uphold its image as the leading representative of Turkish nationalist ideology in politics.

However, this dominance would experience its most significant challenge in 2015. Although it is difficult to describe any period in contemporary Turkish politics as ‘uneventful,’ 2015 arguably marks the beginning of the most turbulent era in the country’s recent history, characterized by political instability, increasing polarization, and a shift towards authoritarianism. And the strife within the MHP that ultimately gave birth to the İYİ Party is deeply intertwined with this broader political context. In the June 2015 elections, for the first time since 2002, the ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party - AK Party) lost its parliamentary majority, leading to weeks of unsuccessful coalition negotiations among political parties. While the MHP did not bear sole responsibility for the failure of these talks, its uncompromising stance against any coalition in this period drew much criticism,

particularly from the opposition camp, who blamed the party for undermining the opportunity to push AK Party out of power. Turkey went to the polls again only four months later, resulting in the AK Party regaining its majority in the parliament, while the MHP lost half of the seats it had won in June, and, for the first time in its history, fell behind a pro-Kurdish party, the *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (Peoples' Democratic Party- HDP). Over the next two years, this electoral setback evolved into a dramatic leadership struggle within the MHP that would reshape the Turkish political landscape. A powerful opposition movement led by prominent party figures Meral Akşener, Koray Aydın, Ümit Özdağ, and Sinan Oğan nearly succeeded in ousting Chairman Devlet Bahçeli through a congress. However, as their efforts were repeatedly frustrated in convoluted legal battles and they were being purged one by one by the party leadership, Devlet Bahçeli increasingly aligned himself with AK Party, which, having survived a coup attempt in July 2016, found itself in need of allies to rebuild its political power and intensify its control.

The Constitutional Referendum of 2017 marked the actual beginnings of the İYİ Party. The MHP leadership's abandonment of its long-term opposition to the AK Party and its becoming a staunch ally in Erdoğan's plan to establish an executive presidential system with vast powers and minimal checks and balances further alienated the MHP dissidents. Organizing under a political platform called *Türk Milliyetçileri 'Hayır' Diyor* (Turkish Nationalists Say 'No'), they joined other opposition parties, campaigning against the proposed system change they argued would end Turkish democracy and establish Erdoğan's personal rule. In contrast, the rhetoric of the AK Party-MHP front mounted an even more intense campaign, framing the referendum as a crucial step to ensure a strong and stable government capable of protecting the Turkish state against existential threats coming from every direction. This polarization was reflected in the results as well. The constitutional changes were approved only by a narrow margin, with the Turkish population nearly divided in half. By that time, the MHP dissidents - many of whom had already been expelled from the party - were convinced that their disagreements with the MHP leadership were irreconcilable. And, for this already organized group, the only viable option was to establish a new political party.

Against this backdrop of division and polarization, the advent of the İYİ Party in

October 2017 was seen by many as a beacon of hope for the country's opposition, which had been repeatedly defeated by Erdoğan and his AK Party over the years and furthered weakened by the relentless crackdowns on any perceived threat to the regime following the coup attempt. The party leader, Meral Akşener, had already gained prominence during the referendum campaign, cultivating an image as a defiant and resolute woman "standing in the way of the collapse of Turkey's democracy" (Malsin, 2017). Moreover, given her eclectic political history across various parties and movements within the Turkish right, many anticipated that Akşener and her İYİ Party would be able to appeal to the conservative nationalist electorate of the AK Party and the MHP. And, with Turkish electoral politics hanging in a razor-thin balance after the referendum, swaying even a small portion of this electorate would be enough for the opposition's victory, some argued (Şengül, 2017).

Over the six years leading up to 2023, while the İYİ Party did not ultimately replace Erdoğan, it garnered notable electoral support for a newly-founded political party, formed electoral alliances with the center-left main opposition *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party - CHP), and played a pivotal role in the opposition's then the biggest electoral win against the AK Party since 2002 in the 2019 local elections. While the party suffered from internal disagreements and resignations during this period as well, these issues remained largely overlooked as long as the party and the opposition were enjoying electoral success or anticipating future victories.

However, this overall picture was significantly undermined with the 2023 elections. The deeply disappointing defeat of the CHP Chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential race against Erdoğan, coupled with the opposition's failure to secure a parliamentary majority despite various opinion polls predicting a comfortable victory over the weakening AK Party government, dealt a severe blow to all opposition parties, with the İYİ Party arguably suffering the most.

The İYİ Party made its objection to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy known during a dramatic three-day episode only two months before the elections, where Meral Akşener first left the opposition alliance with a fiery speech and was later persuaded to return. One can say that this public showdown marked the beginning of the İYİ

Party's decline. The party received so much criticism for its stance during this period that its relations with the rest of the opposition camp soured, and its image as a moderate and democratic nationalist actor in the fight against authoritarianism was significantly tarnished. The conflict was only exacerbated by Kılıçdaroğlu's defeat in elections, leading the İYİ Party to isolate itself and adopt the motto of a "free and independent İYİ Party" that exists on its own and operates with its own political agenda. Meanwhile, a period of resignations and expulsions unfolded as many party members grew disillusioned with the 2023 election results, the party's handling of the candidacy crisis, and the decision to field its own candidates in the local elections of March 2024. Amid these rifts, the İYİ Party performed relatively poorly in the local elections, which ultimately led to the Akşener's stepping down as the party leader after seven years and the election of Müsavat Dervişoğlu as her successor.

Throughout its seven years of existence, as the İYİ Party navigated through the tumultuous terrain of Turkish politics and its own internal issues, its external perception constantly shifted based on these, and the party had difficulties establishing a firm political identity. Several political positions have been attributed to the party over time. Some viewed the party as offering a softer, more modern, or even progressive version of Turkish nationalism that opened a new chapter in the country's nationalist politics that the MHP has long dominated. Indeed, seeking to distance themselves from their former party, the İYİ Party often presented itself as a moderate and reasonable alternative to the ultra-nationalist radical right or any other ideology in Turkey, for that matter. Their rhetoric was centered on the goal of unifying people at the 'center' and winning the votes of the discontented masses. However, in the end, the organizational backbone of the party consisted largely of former MHP dissidents who followed Akşener to the İYİ Party, and this has always hung above them as a source of suspicion against their self-proclaimed 'moderation.' Even within the party, its political identity was a point of contention. Every now and then, party members without an MHP background would express frustration over the dominance of the ultranationalist ex-MHP cadres in the party, while those who came from the MHP would criticize the party leadership for their political fluidity and perceived lack of principles. Thus, questions about the party's identity have persisted: Was it a champion of democracy emerging from the nationalist right to challenge Erdoğan's authoritarian regime? Was it a nationalist party similar to the

MHP, with the split driven more by differences in approach rather than ideology? Or was it a center-right party determined to outgrow its ultra-nationalist roots? Perhaps, as mentioned above, it was the representative of a revisioned and reformed version of Turkish nationalism.

This ambiguity surrounding the İYİ Party's political identity was what initially sparked my interest in the party. Despite establishing a significant presence in recent Turkish politics, the party has so far eluded easy categorizations, with various observers having their own interpretations of the party's position and its nationalism depending on the context or their own individual views. Meral Akşener herself acknowledged this very issue in a 2022 interview, expressing her frustration with diverse and often conflicting definitions imposed upon her party:

Others always have their own definitions of us. The 'MHP version 2.0'—that's someone else's definition. '[Kurds] won't vote for them'—that's someone else's definition. 'The Ülkücüs are being sidelined'—that's someone else's definition. Our definition is this: We, I repeat, are the proponents of reasonable politics, a reasonable discourse, an attitude free from insults, and a language that focuses on facts and events, offering solutions without attacking individuals, their families, or anything else personal. (TV100 Candaş Tolga Işık ile Az Önce Konuştum, 2022)

Therefore, in light of all these, this thesis is an attempt to explore what kind of nationalist ideology the İYİ Party represents and where it can be located within the broader Turkish nationalist tradition.

In addressing my research questions, I attempt to tackle the issue of these externally imposed labels - an evident source of resentment for the İYİ Party – by directly asking the party members how they describe and differentiate themselves in their own words. To my knowledge, this approach has not been employed so far in the existing literature on the İYİ Party, which actually remains severely limited. Rather than conducting a systematic comparison with any other nationalist party or movement, I return to a metaphorical clean slate, allowing party members to present in detail how they make sense of their nationalism and their overall position in Turkish politics.

Given its recent establishment, comprehensive and detailed analyses of the İYİ Party and its political trajectory and position based on systematic data remain notably scarce. Furthermore, existing studies often exclude the post-2023 period of turmoil and change for the party due to the rapidly shifting political landscape of the country and the constraints of research timelines. Of course, a similar challenge arises for my research as well. Days after my fieldwork was completed, the İYİ Party selected a new leader who may potentially steer the party in a significantly different direction. Therefore, to better align with this change, I frame this study as an examination of the first seven years of the party under Akşener's leadership, from its emergence in 2017 to the election of Müsavat Dervişoğlu in 2024.

The main findings of my research indicate that although much of the discussion about the İYİ Party has focused on its differences and similarities with the MHP, the party's nationalism is predominantly shaped by the official nationalism established during the early Republican period. From its definition of the nation to its stance on religion or foreign policy, the party advocates a return to the default settings of the Turkish state, believing this return will save the country from the brink of collapse brought about by the two decades of divisive, Islamist authoritarian rule under the AK Party.

The İYİ Party indeed portrays itself as fundamentally democratic and advocates moderation, careful calculation, and planning in all matters. However, the gravity of their deep-seated concerns about cultural homogeneity and territorial integrity, which they also adopted from official nationalism, raise legitimate questions about the sustainability of their democratic and moderate stance. Additionally, while the party espouses relatively progressive views on women's issues compared to other right-wing and nationalist parties, a traditionalist current displayed by some elite may reverse this position in the post-Akşener era. Finally, the party also exhibits explicit xenophobic populist tendencies in its immigration agenda. It is these tensions within the İYİ Party's ideology that perplex many outside observers and make it difficult for the party to present a coherent identity under the ever-changing landscape of Turkish politics.

In addition to exploring the widely debated but greatly understudied ideological position of a new actor in Turkey's nationalist politics, this study also seeks to

contribute to the broader literature on party ideology by demonstrating that notions of ideological moderation or centrism are often defined in relation to perceived extremes within a political context. For instance, the İYİ Party, with its anti-multiculturalist tendencies and pronounced anti-immigrant rhetoric, can position itself at the democratic center by contrasting its stance with the radical right-wing populism of the ZP and especially the authoritarian political Islamism of the AK Party. Indeed, the dominance of the AK Party over Turkish politics established through its successive electoral victories, accompanied by a pronounced democratic backsliding in the country since the early 2010s, has fostered a “democracy-authoritarianism cleavage,” overshadowing other ideological faultlines within Turkish society. In this context, opposition parties, including the İYİ Party, increasingly position themselves as a democratic bloc opposing the encroaching authoritarianism of the AK Party (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020, p. 1496). Therefore, in case of the AK Party's potential fall from power, ideological repositioning may follow among opposition parties, particularly for the İYİ Party, given its already relative political stance.

Moreover, each subsection of this thesis seeks to engage with and stimulate further research in the broader literatures on populist right, anti-Westernism, and feminism by empirically examining a self-proclaimed moderate opposition party from the nationalist right in the Turkish context. This is particularly relevant given that the existing literature on these topics is often characterized by a binary view when it comes to Turkey: the AK Party is seen as anti-democratic, anti-Western, populist, and Islamist, while the opposition is viewed as its monolithic antithesis.

1.1. Research Design and Methodology

Treating the İYİ Party as an episode within the nearly 75-year-long history of the Turkish nationalist parties, I conducted a qualitative single case study and interview-based research examining the nature and characteristics of the party's nationalism. As I explained earlier, the methodological premise of this study has always been going beyond the existing descriptions of the İYİ Party from outsiders and directly engaging with its members, asking them to present and explain their nationalism in their own words. Within this general framework, I dedicated Chapter 2 to examine the historical trajectory of the İYİ Party in detail to better grasp the circumstances

that gave rise to this political entity and its potential influence on the party members. For this, I utilized secondary data from various sources, such as scholarly works, research reports, newspaper articles, and social media entries. After establishing the political contexts surrounding the İYİ Party's birth as well as its highs and lows, I turned my attention to the people who actually make up the party in Chapter 3.

In my quest to explore the İYİ Party's nationalism from their own perspective, there were several viable methodological routes I could take. The first was to examine the content of official party documents such as the party program or election manifestos. These documents, commonly used in the study of party politics due to their accessibility and cost-effectiveness, are essentially publicly announced characteristics and goals of the party to which its members are expected to adhere. As such, they provide a broad overview of the party's stance and agenda on various issues. For instance, Akgün (2023), in her master's thesis, compares the nationalisms of the İYİ Party and the MHP through an analysis of their respective party by-laws, while Canbolat (2023) examines the İYİ Party's by-laws to assess the level of intra-party democracy. Both studies provide valuable insights into the İYİ Party's political position. However, it is also important to recognize that party documents are carefully and strategically crafted documents by the party officials with many objectives in mind, leading many to discuss whether these documents are the authentic representations of the party position¹ (Laver & Garry, 2000). Therefore, while I took advantage of official party documents to augment my analysis at various points, I chose not to rely on them as my main source of data.

The second option was focusing on Meral Akşener as the embodiment of the party position. Studying the motivations, actions, and statements of a leader to understand the party as a whole has been the dominant approach in the literature examining Turkish political parties, and justifying this methodological choice by referencing the seminal works of well-known Turkish Politics scholars such as Sabri Sayarı and Metin Heper has almost become a tradition. Indeed, as Sayarı (2002) argues, leaders in Turkey wield near-total control over their parties, enjoying exclusive authority

¹ For instance, in analyzing the placement of the Turkish political parties on the left-right ideological scale, Yağcı (2022) observes that similar studies on various cases report congruence between where the public and experts place political parties, yet they find no alignment between these placements and the party positions as coded from their manifestos.

over essential matters such as candidate selection, political patronage allocation, or ensuring party discipline. Thus, a leader's opinions and preferences play a significant role in the overall direction of the party, and depicting the İYİ Party as "the reflection of Akşener," as Melek (2022, p. 27) did in his master's thesis on Akşener's leadership, would be a plausible option. However, I harbored certain reservations about adopting this approach. Firstly, I observed that solely depending on party leaders to explain political outcomes in Turkish politics was slowly turning into a chronic neglect of the agency of the party elite as people who hold formal positions in the party administration with the ability to influence its decision-making processes. Secondly, and more importantly, I expected the İYİ Party's roots as a collective struggle against the "despotic" leadership of Devlet Bahçeli to have had a defining impact on the minds of the party elite. As a result of joining the opposition movement within the MHP, many of them were made to relinquish their decades-long political and emotional attachment to their party and instead invested materially and personally in a new and "democratic" political project under the leadership of Akşener. All of these, I reckoned, likely had a bearing on the party elite's mindset and made them more assertive in their interactions with the leadership. Therefore, as with party documents, Akşener's actions and statements were used at various points of the analysis as supplementary data.

For these reasons, from the outset of my research, I was determined to directly engage with individuals besides Akşener, who have a formal role in shaping the party's public image, agenda, and direction at the national level. Thus, elite interviews emerged as the most suitable methodological choice. Furthermore, I hoped that having face-to-face, in-depth conversations with these figures under the assurance of confidentiality would increase the chance of receiving detailed and candid responses. What is more, having in-person interviews in elite offices would have given me the opportunity to directly observe their manners and behaviors, immerse myself in the physical environment in which my respondents operate, and enable me to engage with individuals they work with, such as administrative aides, consultants, or assistants (Tuncel, 2024).

1.1.1. Selection of the Interviewees

Based on the discussion above, I selected my interviewees from among the high-

ranking party members of the İYİ Party with positions to influence the party policies during the period under examination. Thus, my sampling frame included politicians in the party's governing bodies as well as its deputies in the *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi* (Grand National Assembly of Turkey - TBMM).

The İYİ Party has two principal bodies. The first, the *Genel İdare Kurulu* (General Executive Board– GİK), functions as the decision-making assembly for the party, having a mandate over essential matters such as the convening of party congresses, the conduct of inter-party negotiations, participating in elections, or amending the party constitution (İYİ Parti, n.d.a, pp. 31-32). The GİK members are elected in national congresses by the party delegates, and over the past seven years, their numbers have fluctuated between 50 and 80, currently sitting at 50. The second governing body, the *Başkanlık Divanı* (Chairmanship Council - BD), is described in the party constitution as “the highest executive board of the party,” and it is responsible for implementing the decisions made by the GİK. The BD is composed of the leader and the vice chairs of the party, who are appointed by the leader herself (İYİ Parti, n.d.a, pp. 31-32). As of August 2024, it has 20 members. Additionally, the İYİ Party also has a parliamentary group in the TBMM. Although it secured 43 deputies in the May 2023 general election, the number has since decreased to 32 as of August 2024, with several resignations and one expulsion. These deputies represent the position of their party in the national assembly and participate in the legislative activity in its name.

From this sampling frame, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten party officials who were selected through convenience sampling. At the time of my interviews, five of these individuals held positions in both governing bodies; three of them were deputies only, while the remaining two were members of their party's BD and GİK, as well as the TBMM.

Convenience sampling was chosen due to several practical concerns. First of all, while not impossible, constructing a probability sample and accessing all individuals in this sample for any elite interview is often quite challenging due to the “extraordinarily busy lives of the respondents,” as Rivera, Kozyreva, and Sorevskii (2002) put it. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the period during which I prepared for and conducted my fieldwork was especially turbulent for the İYİ Party, which

was first engaged in an intense campaign for the March 31st, 2024, local elections and then began preparing for a congress to elect a new leader following the disappointing election results. Therefore, scheduling for the interviews would be (and indeed was) particularly difficult due to the elite's hectic programs. Moreover, since May 2023, there have been constant changes within the party cadres, which only added to my reservations about a probability sample, as it would have meant frequent and costly adjustments to my sample. By the time my fieldwork started, many party members had either resigned or been expelled, and these departures continued after the congress on April 27th as well. In fact, two of my interviewees resigned from the İYİ Party shortly after I completed my research. Given these circumstances, I arranged one interview during a visit by one of my interviewees to Bilkent University, while for the remaining nine, I relied on a gatekeeper within the party to assist in constructing my sample. Being aware that opting for convenience sampling would potentially decrease the generalizability of my findings, the following table will present the characteristics of the respondents to ensure transparency.

Table 1 Information on Interviewees

	Gender	Position within the party
Interviewee 1	Female	Member of BD, GİK + Deputy
Interviewee 2	Female	Member of BD, GİK + Deputy
Interviewee 3	Male	Member of BD, GİK (resigned from the party)
Interviewee 4	Female	Member of BD, GİK
Interviewee 5	Male	Member of BD, GİK
Interviewee 6	Male	Member of BD, GİK
Interviewee 7	Female	Deputy
Interviewee 8	Male	Deputy (resigned from the party)
Interviewee 9	Male	Deputy
Interviewee 10	Male	Member of BD, GİK

1.1.2. The Interview Process and the Analysis of the Data

While I had previously attended public party events and parliamentary group sessions as a non-participant observer to familiarize myself with the life and atmosphere at the İYİ Party, my official field research started in April 2024 and

lasted for approximately a month. Therefore, all of the interviews were conducted while Meral Akşener was still the chair of the party, which allowed my analysis to capture the culmination of the party's founding period under her leadership.

The duration of my interviews ranged between 15 to 80 minutes. I was permitted to record nine of them, while one participant declined to consent to any recording. Although the vast majority of the participants did not appear apprehensive about speaking with me, many demanded to know which other party elites I had interviewed before them. However, the most challenging aspect was completing the interviews within the time allocated to me, as respondents often had other engagements immediately afterward. In such moments, I politely informed them that I only had a few remaining questions and could finish the interview at any point if they wished so. Nevertheless, despite these time pressures, each respondent was cooperative and willing to answer all my questions. Interestingly, my positionality as a "student" seemed to work in my favor in this matter. Although at the start of each interview, I presented myself as a researcher as well as a graduate student to minimize the power imbalance, as advised by scholars experienced in conducting elite interviews (Rivera et al., 2002; Tuncel, 2024), most of the party officials perceived me primarily as a "young student seeking help for her project," which made them more inclined to extend the time they had reserved for me. For instance, at the end of one interview, the respondent apologized for her consultant's frequent interruptions that urged me to hurry and said, "These people are like this; they do not understand what it's like to be a student."

Furthermore, as I had anticipated, conducting face-to-face interviews gave me the chance to interact with those surrounding the party elite. The interviews took place in the politicians' offices at two different party buildings and the TBMM, and often, I had to wait for a considerable time for the elite to either arrive at their offices or finish their ongoing meetings. These moments allowed me to immerse myself in the environment and engage with the consultants and administrative assistants. These conversations and observations not only enriched my analysis but also deepened my comprehension of the daily workings of the political life at the İYİ Party, allowing me to observe firsthand the role of the party elite in the party's policy- and agenda-making.

My interview guideline was structured into two analytic sections (see Appendix E). In the first section, I asked my interviewees questions about how they define themselves ideologically, including their nationalism, as well as how they distinguish themselves from other political movements or parties. Then, in the second section, I inquired about their positions on various policy areas, including the Kurdish Question, migration, foreign policy, and women's issues.² As explained earlier, my approach to the İYİ Party's nationalism was descriptive and I aimed to explore where the party can be located in the nationalist politics of Turkey based on their own perspective. Consequently, while my questions to the elite were informed by earlier analyses of nationalist political parties in Turkey, including the limited literature on the İYİ Party itself, I did not wish to remain wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework. Thus, for examining the elite's responses, I employed thematic analysis, due to its theoretical and epistemological flexibility, and organized my analysis around recurring meanings, motifs, and thought patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In each area of interest—whether national identity, foreign policy, or women's issues—I focused on the aspects that emerged as most prevalent in elite's responses. In identifying these patterns, I approached my data at a "semantic level," focusing exclusively on what the participants said explicitly, which I found to be better suited for the descriptive nature of my study (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

1.2. Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed historical review of Turkish nationalism from its inception to 2015. Chapter 3 traces the developmental trajectory of the İYİ Party from its origins in the 2015 MHP intra-party conflict to its emergence as a significant opposition force in Turkey, highlights key political milestones, and provides an extensive debate regarding the party's identity and position within the literature. Chapter 4 offers an in-depth analysis of the İYİ Party's nationalism based on fundamental dimensions such as the party's definition of 'the nation' and 'nationalism,' followed by an examination of the party's perspective on issues like

² Instead of evaluating the İYİ Party's position within the broader framework of gender, including LGBTQ+ rights, I concentrated my analysis solely on women's issues. I made this choice primarily to focus on the İYİ Party's claim of being a "women's movement" but, more pressingly, to avoid potentially sensitive topics that could jeopardize my rapport with the elite. Although asking such questions might have been possible towards the end of the interviews, once a certain level of understanding had been established, I opted not to raise them as the respondents were typically tired or in a hurry and thus eager for the interviews to finish.

religion, minorities, foreign policy, womanhood, and immigration. The analysis in this chapter is grounded in semi-structured interviews and field research and provides a look into the party's nationalism from the perspective of its elite. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study by summarizing the main findings, exploring their implications for the broader literature on party politics, and offering suggestions for further research.



CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF TURKISH NATIONALISM

2.1. The Late Ottoman Period and the Rise of Turkish Nationalist Thought

In his modernist take on the rise of nation-states, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2006, p. 81) notes that with the revolutions first in the Americas and then in France, the notion of an “independent national state” had already been established as a “model” or a “blueprint” to be emulated by the 1820s. This model, grounded in the principle of the sovereignty of equal and free citizens, spread across Europe in the 19th century, giving rise to nationalist movements in both the central and peripheral regions of the continent. However, Anderson also highlights how, unlike their predecessors, these movements were built explicitly around vernacular language and culture, posing significant challenges to the continent’s multi-ethnic empires. In response to this legitimacy crisis, the dynasties of Europe underwent a process of “naturalization,” as Anderson (2006, p. 86) calls it, in the second half of the century where the monarchs became fellow nationals, representing the interests of above all the national community. Yet, while the Romanovs became Russian or the Hanoverians became English, pursuing aggressive policies of Russification and Anglicization in their respective dominions, the Ottomans sought to establish political legitimacy by creating an overarching civic Ottoman identity.

The Ottoman response can be seen as a reaction to the unique challenges it faced during this period, particularly mounting pressures stemming from its long-declining economic and political power. Since the previous century, many members of the Ottoman state elite increasingly viewed the reorganization of the Ottoman state into a modern Western one as the only path to strengthen its standing vis-à-vis the Great Powers of Europe and ultimately ‘save the Empire.’ Within this overall agenda of Westernization, the underlying concepts of liberty, equality, and a secular

understanding of state and citizenship inevitably raised issues in an Empire that had been ruled for centuries based on religious division and Muslim dominance. Non-Muslims (who constituted over 40% of the population in the 1820s) were regarded as secondary citizens, though they enjoyed partial autonomy under the millet system with their own laws, institutions, and officials. However, despite their legal status, the religious minorities of the Empire were relatively stronger both economically and politically, supported by European powers who often acted as their protectors and intervened in Ottoman politics on their behalf.

Hoping that granting equal citizenship to all subjects of the Empire and fostering patriotic loyalty to the state would curb the rise of nationalist rebellions and fend off foreign interventions, the Ottoman elite introduced a series of reforms in this period during what became known as the *Tanzimat* (Reform) Era, beginning with the Gülhane Edict of 1839, the first official document to proclaim the adoption of equal citizenship. These efforts culminated in the declaration of a written constitution in 1876, which proclaimed that all subjects of the Ottoman state, regardless of religion or sect, were to be considered ‘Ottoman’ and stand equal before the law (Davison, 1954; Kushner, 1977; Eissenstat, 2015).

Despite these efforts, the official policy of cultivating a common Ottoman identity, often referred to as Ottomanism, met with limited success. The Empire’s religious hierarchy was deeply ingrained in the minds of the Muslim public, who viewed reform attempts as “counter-intuitive” and resent them as concessions to non-Muslims imposed by foreign powers (Davison, 1954; Eissenstat, 2015, p. 436). Even the ardent supporters of the Ottomanist project, a group of reform-minded Muslim intellectuals who played a key role in the formulation of the Constitution of 1876 and were known as the New Ottomans,³ argued that equality could never be achieved by granting special economic and political privileges to Christian communities under foreign pressure. Similarly, the promise of reform and reorganization did not hold

³ In their writings, which greatly inspired the members of the Young Turk movement and the later Republican elite, New Ottomans defended a constitutional and territorial Ottoman nationalism coupled with a strong commitment to democratic and representative government. On the other hand, they also argued that reforms should be carried out within an Islamic framework as Muslim religion and law were inherently compatible with Western ideals, grounding concepts such as democracy or parliament in the Quran. Additionally, their outlook also revealed traces of a rising Turkish consciousness, highlighting the complex, interwoven, and sometimes contradictory self-identifications that characterized the late Ottoman intellectual arena and were inherited and built upon by the founding elite of the Republic.

much appeal to the rising nationalism among minorities either since, at that point, what they fundamentally sought was an independent sovereign state rather than equality (Davison, 1954; Eissenstat, 2015).

The nationalist uprisings in the Balkans in 1876 escalated into a war with Russia a year later, ending in the loss of vast Ottoman territories in Europe, along with Cyprus. The departure of much of the Empire's non-Muslim population, coupled with the massive influx of Muslim refugees from these territories as well as from former Ottoman dominions in Russia, had profound demographic consequences significantly influencing public consciousness. As European powers encroached on Muslim territories worldwide, including the Ottoman land itself, now largely reduced to Anatolia and the Middle East, the existing reaction to the reforms among some sections of the Ottoman Muslim community evolved into a political self-awareness in the last two decades of the century, fostering a "sense of common destiny" against the West (Eissenstat, 2015, p. 453).

In the traditional historiography of the late Ottoman period, it is often argued that the reign of Abdülhamid II marked a shift from Ottomanism to Islamism. Indeed, Abdülhamid II quickly capitalized on the above-discussed anti-Western sentiments under the framework of Islamism, increasingly employing Islamic symbols and rhetoric and emphasizing the Sultan's role as the Caliph. Furthermore, following the defeat in the war with Russia, the Hamidian regime dissolved the parliament in 1878, established by the constitution, which he had approved only two years earlier. However, as both Kushner (1977) and Eissenstat (2015) underline, the official policy of Ottomanism continued during this period, with the regime reinterpreting Ottoman national identity through an Islamic lens to bolster its legitimacy among the now predominantly Muslim population.

Moreover, modernization efforts persisted under Abdülhamid, albeit shaped by his own autocratic agenda, including the reorganization of bureaucracy, the promotion of secular education in Ottoman Turkish, and the development of communication and transportation infrastructure. These initiatives, which scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner regard as hallmarks of the rise of modern nationalism, provided a somewhat fertile ground for the Turkish national consciousness to take root. As Eissenstat (2015, pp. 454-455) observes, "ethnicity and language seem to

have played a relatively little role [in the period], though by the end of the Hamidian regime, many secularly educated Ottomans were able to read and write passible Turkish whether they lived in Damascus or Smyrna.”

However, the primary origins of Turkish nationalism as a linguistic and cultural movement, comparable to minority nationalisms within the Empire and across 19th-century Europe, lay elsewhere. Creating a sense of Turkishness on which the national identity would solely be based was especially challenging for the Ottomans at the time. For much of the dynasty’s rule, the term “Turk” had been used descriptively to refer to the Turkish-speaking populations of the Empire. At times, it even carried pejorative connotations, depicting people as backward nomads or peasants. The Ottoman elite’s understanding of Turkishness was significantly influenced by the works of European Orientalists in the latter half of the century, particularly of figures such as Arminius Vambery and Leon Cahun. These writers, through their analysis of the history, culture, and language of Asian peoples, including the Turks, elevated the image of Turkishness into an ancient civilization ‘worthy’ of scientific examination by Western scholars. And by extension, they also heightened the Ottoman Turks’ awareness of the Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia and helped them imagine these groups as their “brethren” (Kushner, 1977, p. 10; Eissenstat, 2015; Bora, 2017). This emerging consciousness was evident at the time in the works of Ottoman elites such as Ali Suavi, one of the New Ottoman intellectuals who explored religious and ethnic ties with other Turkic states, Mustafa Celaledin Paşa, a military officer of Polish origins who examined the racial origins of the Turks, or Şemsettin Sami, a linguist who focused on Turkish lexicography.

However, the burgeoning Turkish nationalism did not turn from a cultural awakening into a distinct political program until the early 20th century. A crucial factor in this development was visits and migrations by Pan-Turkist intellectuals from the Turkish provinces of Russia to the Ottoman Empire. Prominent figures of the Turkish nationalist movement in Russia, such as Gaspıralı İsmail Bey, Hüseyinzade Ali Turan, and Ağaoğlu Ahmed Bey, became active participants in the Ottoman political and intellectual life during this period, advocating for the national political revival of Turks both in Russia and Ottoman Empire and promoting linguistic and spiritual unity among Turks everywhere (Kushner, 1977; Bora, 2017).

Among these émigrés, Yusuf Akçura's influence in shaping the Turkish nationalist ideology was the most significant. In his 1904 essay, *Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset* (Three Ways of Policy), which came to be recognized as one of the foundational works of Turkish nationalism, Akçura articulated for the first time the idea of restructuring the Ottoman Empire as a nation-state based on Turkish ethnicity and presented it as a distinct political alternative to the established doctrines of Islamism and Ottomanism. Reflecting on the last several decades of the Ottoman Empire and its continuous decline and disintegration despite the efforts to unify its diverse peoples, Akçura viewed Ottomanism as a failed political experiment. Instead, he defended grounding the Ottoman state in its fundamental and the only loyal component, Turks, while positioning Islam in a supporting role to the national identity (Kushner, 1977; Eissenstat, 2015; Bora, 2017).

Nevertheless, the full-scale implementation of Turkish nationalist ideology required even further impetus and did not materialize until the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. It was true that pan-Turkist ideas were influential among the Young Turks who came into power with the Constitutional Revolution of 1908. However, as Eissenstat (2015) convincingly argues, the Young Turk government was, above all, pragmatic in its actions and ultimately continued to pursue the long-term goal of imperial survival. This pragmatism is evident in their diverse policies, ranging from instituting citizenship classes in schools to attempting to increase the use of Turkish in education and bureaucracy or supporting the development of a Muslim bourgeoisie at the expense of Christian minorities.

On the other hand, the futility of these efforts became increasingly evident among the Empire's remaining population, a sentiment that peaked during the Balkan Wars of 1911-1912. After the wars, the Ottoman Empire lost all of its remaining holdings in Europe, and the brutality of the conflicts fueled a deep-seated resentment not only against the Christian Balkan states but also against the West in general, which was accused of remaining silent in the face of atrocities despite its lofty discourses of civilization and humanity. Furthermore, losing against independent sovereign states that had once been under imperial control had a profoundly traumatic effect on the Ottoman psyche. Turkish nationalists of the time perceived these events as the consequence of a delayed national awakening, one that the Empire's former

Christian minorities had achieved before Turks⁴ (Bora, 2017). As the Ottomans felt increasingly besieged by foreign powers, this narrative of belatedness became central to the nationalist thought, framing Turkish nationalism as the urgent and only path to survival. In his 1923 book *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (The Principles of Turkism), Ziya Gökalp, one of the leading ideologues of Turkish nationalism and a major influence on both the Young Turks and the Republican elite, summarizes the nationalist perspective during the last decade of the Empire as follows:

This nation did not even have its own name until recently. The Tanzimat reformers told it: ‘You are only Ottoman, do not, by looking at other nations, seek a national name for yourself; if you ask for a national name, you will cause the fall of the Ottoman Empire.’ The poor Turk was forced to say, out of fear of losing his homeland, ‘I swear I am not a Turk, I belong to no group other than the Ottoman one.’ (...) It has now become impossible for [these kinds of] artificial communities made up of hundreds of nations to continue. From now on, each nation will live as a harmonious, sincere, and natural community as a separate state. (As cited in Keskin, 1999, pp. 6-7)

All of these sentiments and convictions were deeply intensified during the First World War and finally evolved into action after the Ottoman Empire’s devastating defeat in the war and the following occupation of its capital by Allied armies as well as the invasion of Allied-backed Greek and Armenian forces on the eastern, western, and southern fronts. Within the next three years, between 1919 and 1922, a national resistance movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—an Ottoman officer and former member of the Young Turk movement—defied the imperial government in İstanbul, established a new national parliament in Ankara, and successfully pushed back the European invasion. The new parliament abolished the monarchy in 1922 and proclaimed the establishment of an independent Republic of Turkey the following year, thus bringing the aspirations of Turkish nationalism to fruition.

2.2. Republican Nationalism

⁴ This sentiment is powerfully displayed in a 1914 poem by Ziya Gökalp, where he wrote: “Do not stop, Greek, do not stop, let your pride swell! / Rain insults upon the Turk! / For this slumbering nation, this humiliation is not enough. / Strike, former slave, shame them! / Let them not sleep, awaken them!”

In examining the Turkish nation-state's formation, Ayşe Kadioğlu (2001) remarks that the Turkish case sequentially differs from the typical examples of Germany and France, where the boundaries of national identity emerged either before or simultaneously with the nation-state's establishment. On the contrary, the questions of what Turkishness means and who qualifies as a Turk were explicitly addressed by the founding leaders only after the establishment of the Turkish nation-state in 1923, making the early Turkish republic "a state seeking its nation," as Kadioğlu (2001, p. 287) describes.

A major issue confronted by the founding elite in this search was determining the role of religion in Turkish national identity. As previously mentioned, the Ottoman Empire's continuous military defeats in the late 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in its shrinking to the Anatolian heartland and the loss of a substantial portion of its non-Muslim population. This demographic change was further intensified as Muslims living in these former domains were pushed out by the victorious Christian forces, which led to an influx of refugees into the Empire. As Eissenstat (2015) notes, during this period, much of the Ottoman population, including the ruling elite, was either themselves refugees or the children of the refugees. These developments had a profound impact on the nationalization of the Muslim identity, and as the Balkan Wars and First World War unfolded, the emerging sense of shared political fate among the Empire's now overwhelmingly Muslim population evolved into a unified struggle for existence.

This interplay of religion and nationalism played a central role during the War of Independence as well, with some scholars even arguing that "it was not a 'Turkish' war of liberation, as claimed in the official historiography, but rather a war of 'Muslim elements'" (Yavuz, 2003, p. 45). Indeed, the rhetoric of Islamic solidarity was systematically used during the war to mobilize the remaining multi-ethnic but Muslim masses of the country, including Turks, Kurds, Circassians, Albanians, and Laz. For instance, the new parliament in Ankara was deliberately opened on a Friday, the Islamic holy day, with a solemn ceremony that featured Quranic recitations. Additionally, the Ankara government frequently portrayed the Allied occupation as the "last Crusade" and enlisted over 150 religious notables, including the Mufti of Ankara, to issue a decree framing participation in the independence

struggle as a sacred duty (Aktürk, 2015, p. 790).

However, after the final victory and the proclamation of the Republic, the ruling elite introduced a series of reforms and policies that aimed at forging a secular and modern nation-state for which they would need to construct a compatible national identity. First, in a single day on March 3rd, 1924, the Islamic Caliphate was abolished, the Ministry of Islamic Law and Religious Foundations was dissolved, and all the educational institutions across the nation were placed under state supervision to ensure compliance with the new secular curriculum. Within the next four years, the regime introduced new legal codes modeled on secular European law, replaced the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, switched from Islamic to Gregorian calendar, outlawed the wear of Islamic and Ottoman headdress for men, banned all religious orders, and ultimately in 1928, removed from the constitution the article designating Islam as the religion of the state (Aktürk, 2015).

Instead of viewing this shift as a sharp break from the past, it is important to remember that the founding leaders of the Republic were brought up under the political and intellectual climate of the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Their formative years were characterized by the Empire's struggle to forge a common national identity, which was part of its broader goals of modernization and progress. For the Republican elite, as for the nationalists of the late Ottoman Empire who influenced their thinking, modern nationhood was the key to the success of European states, as it was the ultimate stage in the evolution of societies (Berkes, 1959). Within this framework, secular law and administration were seen as "natural and necessary consequences" of becoming a modern nation capable of competing with advanced civilizations (Atatürk, 1925), while an Islamic understanding of national identity was seen as a "hang-over" of the country's imperial and theocratic past (Berkes, 1959, p. 25) and the root of social and economic backwardness. Instead, following Ziya Gökalp's conceptualizations, the regime viewed Islam as a faith with its universal messages on morality and ethics, shaping the values, mores, and, ultimately, the culture of the Turkish nation. They believed that practices often attributed to the Turks at the time, such as polygamy or female seclusion, were, in fact, the result of Arabic and Persian civilizations infiltrating Islam (Berkes, 1959; Çağaptay, 2006). And ultimately, Islam was meant to be a matter of personal conscience and faith,

confined to the private sphere.

Therefore, the Republican elite aimed to replace religion-based national unity with a new form centered solely on ‘Turkishness,’ defined by secular principles such as territory, citizenship, and a shared history. First and foremost, from 1924 onwards, each constitution consistently affirmed that citizenship in the Turkish state is what defined someone as a Turk, meaning that anyone, regardless of religion or race, was able to join the Turkish nation if they wished. Moreover, in Turkey’s first civics book, published in 1930 by Afet İnan—Atatürk’s adopted daughter and one of the leading historians of the early Republic—the Renanist concept of the nation was followed almost word for word, listing “having a rich historical heritage,” “being sincere and genuine in the shared desire and acceptance of living together,” and “having a collective will to continue preserving this heritage” as the markers of nationhood (İnan, 2010, p. 47). This inclusive and voluntaristic perspective was encapsulated by Atatürk’s famous 1933 quote: “How happy is the one who says I am a Turk” (Aytürk, 2011; Aktürk, 2015).

However, beyond establishing a new definition of Turkishness, the founding leaders needed to solidify it in the hearts and minds of the population. To this end, they embarked on an intense nation-building project that included the “invention” of a compatible national history that would give the diverse citizens of the new state a sense of identity, belonging, and pride. Uğur Çınar (2015) notes that textbooks from this period portrayed the Turks as originating from Central Asia and migrating westward due to severe droughts and climate change. Along their journey to their new homeland in Anatolia, the Turks established a series of great states (including but not limited to the Ottoman Empire), with the story culminating in the Republic of Turkey, which was celebrated as “the best state the Turks ever formed” (Uğur Çınar, 2015, p. 26). Moreover, these textbooks often depicted the local non-Turkish populations encountered on this journey as welcoming and joining the Turks, drawn by their perceived justice, tolerance, and protection.⁵ These narratives served as a

⁵ Influenced by the Turkish History and Language Theses put forward by the early Republican historians and linguists under the guidance of Atatürk, the early textbooks even asserted that Turkish civilization had a defining role in the development of nearly all of world’s cultures and languages. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that, as Turks migrated from Central Asia in various directions, they transmitted their superior cultures to the peoples they encountered. Thus, with the proper methodology, it was believed that all civilization in the world could be traced back to Turkish origins

testament to the great deeds of the Turkish nation in the past as well as its inclusive and tolerant character.

However, in her examination of the textbooks, Uğur Çınar (2015) also finds that the ethnic visibility of non-Turkish peoples fades in the history-telling after they are incorporated into these ‘great Turkish states,’ reemerging only in the context of rebellions, uprisings, or other acts of defiance against the Turkish state's authority. Indeed, for the new regime, once minorities became a part of the Turkish state, their differences were expected to melt away, and they were expected to lose their distinct ethnic identities, becoming culturally Turkified. Therefore, for all its inclusionary narrative, Republican nationalism was also highly assimilatory, and this was primarily due to the traumatic impact of the rapid disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Seeing the Empire's pluralist structure as disharmonious and thus unruly and unsustainable, the founding elite viewed cultural and linguistic unity as crucial as political unity in their nation-building project. They believed that without a unified national identity on all fronts, the new Republic would be vulnerable to the same nationalist separatist currents that had led to the Empire's downfall. To this end, Turkish was declared the sole official language of the Republic, and the use of non-Turkish letters was banned, compelling many minority citizens to adopt Turkified names. In the late 1920s, the state also launched the nationwide “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” campaign to discourage non-Turkish minorities from using their own vernaculars in public (Çağaptay, 2006; Uğur Çınar, 2015).

The language of assimilation was even more pronounced for the country's Muslim minorities. As mentioned earlier, the Republican elite reinterpreted religion as a matter of individual faith and morals. However, they also positioned Islam, albeit in its nominal form, as a component of Turkish national culture. This, together with the shared memory of the War of Independence where Turks fought alongside Kurds, Circassians, and Lazes for liberation, fostered a closer connection with these groups, ultimately leading to their portrayal as “potential Turks” by the new regime (Aytürk, 2011, p. 312). For instance, in the aforementioned civics book, the existence of these communities as distinct ethnic groups was explicitly denied, and “the ideas of Kurdisness, Circassiannes, and even Lazness, and Bosniannes” were depicted as

(Aytürk, 2011; Uğur Çınar, 2015).

“false namings” and relics from archaic times. However, immediately afterward, the author urged the “civilized Turkish nation” not to exclude or look down upon “our Christian and Jewish citizens who (...) bind their future and history to that of the Turkish nation with their conscientious will” (İnan, 2010, p. 46). In line with these views, when the Kurds rose up against the regime’s assimilatory politics multiple times in the late 1920s, they were brutally suppressed, and the uprisings were portrayed as the doings of religious reactionaries incited by the foreign powers instead of recognizing them as distinctly Kurdish movements (Çağaptay, 2006; Ergin, 2014). However, as long as they did not demand cultural rights, individual Kurds were able to rise to significant positions in government and the military under the new regime (Uğur Çınar, 2015). In contrast, the country’s non-Muslim minorities, particularly Greeks and Armenians, were still treated with suspicion, excluded from the state bureaucracy, and faced discriminatory policies. A notable example is the Property Tax of 1942, where these communities were taxed extremely disproportionately to meet the country’s wartime needs (Aytürk, 2011).

The inclusive yet homogenizing character of the early Republican regime led to a complex nation-building process, which continues to be a subject of debate among scholars to this day. During this period, the state officially embraced a civic understanding of national identity based on equality and was legally indifferent to ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. However, it also pursued aggressive assimilation and left little space for minorities to seek ethnic and linguistic recognition without being viewed as threatening or disloyal. For all its internal contradictions, the Republican citizenship model, reinforced by state-sanctioned tools like textbooks, monuments, or museums, became the prevailing narrative, dominating any alternative conceptions of Turkish identity and citizenship. Nonetheless, these alternative narratives did exist, with Racist –Turanism (often included in the broader Pan-Turkist ideology and called as such) being the most prominent.

2.3. An Alternative Turkishness: The Racist-Turanism and the Trials of 1944

Like the other nationalist elite of the Late Ottoman and Republican eras, racists were deeply influenced by the Ottoman Empire’s swift disintegration in its last decades and intercommunal conflicts with Greeks and Armenians during the First World War

and the War of Independence. For racists, though, these bitter memories turned into fixed ideas about non-Turkish elements of the nation and, combined with their deeply held belief in Turkish superiority, formed the basis of their critique against official nationalist rhetoric. Convinced that “those who are not Turkish had always betrayed [the Turks],” they saw the Republican ideals of homogenous equality as “deceitful propaganda” (Atsız, 1951, as cited in Aytürk, 2011, p. 323). According to racists, Kurds or Jews or Greeks or any other ethnically non-Turkish minority could never become a part of the Turkish nation even if they wanted to, and their inclusion would essentially be diluting the Turkish identity (Aytürk, 2011; Uğur Çınar, 2015).

Led by their chief ideologue, Nihal Atsız, racists mounted criticisms against the regime on several other fronts, from personalized attacks on Atatürk and his associates to the country’s foreign policy. Particularly, their views on Turkey’s relations with the Soviet Union contributed to their ultimate persecution in 1944 by the Republican regime. Unlike territorial official nationalism, the racists advocated for an irredentist perspective on foreign policy aimed at establishing a Turanian Empire that would unite all Turkic-speaking peoples, especially those under Soviet rule. This led them to condemn the cordial relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union, including the 1925 non-aggression treaty signed between the two states, as a “cowardly and treacherous appeasement policy” (Aytürk, 2011, p. 328).

As the Allied victory in the Second World War became increasingly certain by 1944, the non-aligned Turkish government did indeed seek to appease Stalin to protect itself against potential Soviet aggression after the war. Consequently, in May 1944, 47 prominent figures within the racist movement, including Atsız, were detained and imprisoned. Although all of the accused were eventually cleared of the charges, the Racist-Turanist Trials of 1944 became a watershed moment in the trajectory of Turkish nationalism. First and foremost, racism as a political ideology completely lost its appeal to the nationalists after the Nazis were defeated in the war, and the atrocities they committed became public knowledge. And, having already denounced the Racist-Turanists within Turkey in 1944, the rhetoric of the Republican regime underwent a dramatic shift, excluding all racist jargon as well as any term that might imply racism or ethnic nationalism from its vocabulary. As Aytürk (2011, p. 335) notes, from then on, the regime “redefined the [its] approach to the identity question

as an impeccably civic one” and cut its ties with all other forms of Turkish nationalism. This meant that for the first time since the establishment of the Republic, nationalism was no longer a singular, unified movement that had liberated and reformed the country, and there were now other alternative interpretations of Turkish nationalism positioned in opposition to that of the state.

2.4. The Conservative Turn in Turkish Nationalism and the MHP

The end of the CHP’s two-decade single-party rule and the introduction of multi-party politics in the late 1940s marked the beginning of a new chapter in Turkish nationalism, along with other groups that had been given little opportunity to politically and independently organize under the previous regime. Chief among them was the center-right *Demokrat Parti* (Democrat Party- DP), established in 1946 by dissident politicians from the CHP. The DP campaigned for a relaxation of the strict secularism imposed during the previous two decades and criticized the excessive state intervention in the economy under the single-party government. Ultimately, the party served as a broad coalition of liberals, Islamists, and nationalists (including the racists) who were united in their critique of the Republican regime, as well as in their shared opposition to Communism (Aktürk, 2012; Aytürk, 2014).

However, the alliance between these groups extended beyond mere political collaboration, particularly the relationship between Islam and nationalism. Firstly, as it was nearly impossible for the Islamist intelligentsia and politicians to operate openly on a conservative platform, nationalism provided a much-needed refuge at the time, offering a form of opposition acceptable to the state authorities. During this period, prominent Islamist and conservative thinkers like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nurettin Topçu advocated for a ‘Turkish’ Islam and the revival of Muslim national identity, particularly emphasizing the Ottoman-Muslim heritage that had been deliberately downplayed by the official historical narrative. Their writings were published in Islamist journals that gained wider circulation thanks to a more liberal attitude against the press in the late 40s, and they garnered significant traction among conservative and nationalist groups across the country (Uzer, 2016).

Secondly, the relationship between Islam and nationalism was further intensified with the rise of a new generation of nationalist youth from the country’s periphery.

Raised in traditional, conservative households in rural towns or villages, these individuals starkly contrasted with the earlier generation of modernizing nationalist elites from the late Ottoman period through the end of the single-party era. And, when they moved to the metropolitan cities of İstanbul and Ankara for university education in the late 1940s and 1950s, they experienced a profound cultural shock. Perceiving the colorful and Westernized lifestyle in these cities as perverse, immoral, and completely alien to the national values and spirit, they vehemently blamed the Kemalist regime for fostering what they saw as cultural decadence. Over the years, many of these young nationalists became journalists, authors, or poets, rising to prominence within the right-wing Turkish intelligentsia (Aytürk, 2014). Identifying themselves *milliyetçi muhafazakar* (nationalist conservatives) or *mukaddesatçı* (one upholding sacred Islamic values), these figures played a key role in transforming Turkish nationalism into a conservative ideology between the 1950s and the 1970s (Uzer, 2016).

Meanwhile, the DP government's engagement with nationalism and conservatism was largely shaped by pragmatic concerns. The party did employ religious and nationalist symbols, but primarily to advance its own agenda. It was also careful to prevent conservative nationalist and Islamist groups from dominating the party narrative, particularly because of their strong rhetoric against Atatürk and the Republican reforms (Aytürk, 2014; Uzer, 2016). Thus, believing DP's opposition to be weak and timid, as early as 1947, Turkish nationalists of all stripes in the opposition advocated for an independent nationalist party in their publications. Accordingly, in 1948, the first conservative nationalist party in Turkish political history, *Millet Partisi* (Nation Party - MP), was founded under the leadership of Marshall Fevzi Çakmak. A leading figure in the founding cadre of the Turkish Republic, Çakmak was notable for his religious, nationalist ideas (Çınar & Arıkan, 2002; Aytürk, 2014). Within two years, the party was able to garner significant support from the Turkish periphery, attracting conservative nationalists and Islamists dissatisfied with the DP's opposition to the CHP. Had Çakmak not passed away only one month before the 1950 elections, it was expected that the party would have secured a substantial portion of the DP voters, demonstrating the electoral viability of an independent conservative nationalist party in Turkish politics at the time (Aytürk, 2014).

As the Islamization of the nationalist opposition grew during the 1950s, the tensions between religious nationalists and secular Racists-Turanists were also rising, with the latter being increasingly outnumbered and marginalized. Nevertheless, Atsız was still revered in nationalist circles for his unwavering stance against Kemalism. This, coupled with the DP government's crackdowns on the nationalists – such as the dissolution of *Türk Milliyetçiler Derneği* (Association of Turkish Nationalists) in 1953 on the grounds of reactionism and racism and the closure of the MP the following year on similar charges – helped delay the brewing crisis around the religion within nationalism. However, before this confrontation could unfold, the military intervention of 1960 occurred (Aytürk, 2014).

2.4.1. The Emergence and the Rise of the MHP

A nationalist colonel during the Trials of 1944, Alparslan Türkeş, was part of the junta that overthrew the government and later rose to prominence within the military regime, leading his faction known as the Fourteen. Although Türkeş and his friends gave some nationalists hope that the military regime would adopt a strictly nationalist character, the members of the Fourteen were soon exiled to various Turkish embassies outside the country. However, even during his post in New Delhi, Türkeş was laying the groundwork for a political comeback, with some nationalists anticipating his return as the “long-expected leader of Turkish nationalism” (Aytürk, 2014, p. 705). Upon his return to Turkey in 1963, he, together with some of his old colleagues from the Fourteen, joined the *Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* (Republican Peasant Nation Party - CKMP), a small right-wing party, appealing to the conservative rural electorate (Bora, 2001). Within two years, he was elected as the party's new chair and set out to reconstruct the party's character and ideology. During this early period, Atsız and his circle supported Türkeş and the CKMP, with Atsız writing articles in praise of Türkeş, his former comrade from the 1944 trials, and the CKMP in his journal *Ötüken* (Can, 2001).

In 1965, the year he became the chair of the CKMP, Türkeş published *Dokuz Işık* (Nine Lights) as his ideological doctrine. Giving an eclectic list of nine ideological tenets—nationalism, ülkücülük,⁶ moralism, communalism, scientificism, peasantry,

⁶ Ülkücülük is often translated as ‘idealism’ in scholarly literature analyzing the MHP and its ideology, reflecting the word's literal meaning. However, as Çınar and Arıkan (2002) emphasize,

libertarianism and personalism, developmentalism and populism, industrialism, and technicalism—Türkeş defined his doctrine in the booklet as a distinctly Turkish third way and positioned it as an alternative to equally exploitative Communist and capitalist systems (Bora, 2001).

Nevertheless, the Nine Lights fails to offer an original, or even detailed, layout of Türkeş's understanding of nationalism. In the opening paragraph of his "Nationalism" chapter, Türkeş starts by reaffirming the central rhetoric of the country's official nationalism: that anyone who feels Turkish at heart is a Turk and that every Turkish nationalist should strive to carry his/her country "the forefront of modern civilization" as an independent, honorable, and prosperous member of the international community (Türkeş, 1975, p. 15). Although Türkeş (1975) subsequently describes both himself and his party as pan-Turkist in the same chapter, he reframes this ideology in terms of safeguarding the nation's character, culture, and language, aligning itself with Ziya Gökalp's cultural interpretation of Turkish nationalism, which also deeply influenced the Early Republican approach (Can, 2001). However, within the movement, there were still individuals who placed Turkish ethnicity on par with culture, arguing that they should mutually reinforce each other. For instance, Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, a conservative nationalist figure who significantly influenced Ülkücü ideology in the 1970s, advocated for endogamous marriages to eliminate regional and tribal differences within the Turkish nation as well as to preserve the Turks' allegedly superior phenotypes (Can, 2001; Uzer, 2016). Moreover, another highly influential name within the movement, Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, argued that it was naive to expect the same level of loyalty from the country's ethnically non-Turkish citizens, emphatically declaring that Turkey had a history of suffering at the hands of non-Turks and converts (Uzer, 2016). However, expectedly, either the Nine Lights or any other party document from then on never explicitly condoned this ethno-centrist rhetoric.

Regardless of its specific content, the Nine Lights was treated as a sacred doctrine after its publishing, with even mentioning its name being seen as a sign of loyalty to

since its emergence, the terms Ülkücülük or Ülkücü (also translated as 'idealist') have been exclusively used in the Turkish political context to refer to the nationalist movement that developed under Türkeş's leadership and then became virtually synonymous with the MHP from the late 1960s onward. Therefore, in this thesis, I retain the original Turkish terms to preserve their specific connotations.

Türkeş and the nationalist movement (Bora, 2001), which increasingly came to be known as the Ülkücü movement, following the establishment of Ülkü Ocakları as its youth organization in the late 1960s. As Türkeş's attempts to organize Ülkü Ocakları as well as the overall party organization based on strict discipline and unquestioned loyalty continued, soon, a growing cult of leadership began to form around the CKMP leader who was now referred to as *Başbuğ* (The Chieftain in the ancient militaristic Turkish societies). All of these would later become core components of the Ülkücü movement and ideology, encapsulated by the principle "Leader-Organization-Doctrine" (Bora, 2001; Can, 2001).

Under Türkeş's leadership, the Ülkücüs intensified the survivalist and reactionary tendencies inherent in Turkish nationalism since its inception and made them central to their ideology with a distinctly statist tone. For them, protecting the Turkish nation from internal and external threats became synonymous with protecting the Turkish state, which they saw as the very embodiment of the nation itself (Çınar & Arıkan, 2002). Within this framework, they introduced the concept of *Devlet-i Ebed Müddet* (which can roughly be translated as "the eternal existence of the state"), which posits that the Turkish nation has always been organized and unified under a single state since the beginning of time that has shielded it from disintegration and extinction. According to this view, all historical Turkish states, including the Republic, constitute one continuous and sacred state that preserves the Turkish nation as well as being a manifestation of Turkish national identity (Can, 2001). Against this ideological backdrop, Communism became the number one enemy of the Ülkücü movement. The rise of the Marxist left both in Turkey and internationally during the 1960s and 1970s, which the Ülkücü nationalists viewed as a tool for Soviet Imperialism, shaped their threat perception, leading them to adopt the self-proclaimed mission of fighting Communism alongside the Turkish state.

In terms of the central question of religion, the Nine Lights offers little insight into Türkeş's and the CKMP's stance, and up until the late 1960s, Türkeş's personal views remained largely similar to those of secular Republican or pan-Turkist nationalism (Bora, 2001). However, concerned about the CKMP's poor electoral

performance,⁷ Türkeş and Dündar Taşer, the second-in-command of the party and the founder of the Ülkü Ocakları, were resolute on adopting a more Islamic rhetoric to better appeal to the conservative nationalist voter base. Accordingly, the party's congress in 1967 was designed as a showcase of this ideological turn. In his speech filled with Islamic references, Türkeş introduced a new nationalist discourse that framed Islam as equally integral to national identity alongside Turkishness. This shift towards the "Turkish-Islamic Ideal"⁸ was solidified two years later at the famous 1969 congress, where a new name and emblem were adopted by the party. While consensus was reached on the name 'Nationalist Action Party,' intense conflict arose over the choice of the new emblem. The conservative nationalist majority within the party favored the figure of three crescents, symbolizing the Islamic-Ottoman past and the Ottoman control over the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, while the secular racist-Turanist minority was adamant about choosing the pan-Turkist symbol of the grey wolf. After a long day of tension and confrontation, the final decision on the three crescents marked the end of the long-standing conflict between conservative nationalism and the staunchly secular pan-Turkism finally came to an end with the former emerging victorious (Aytürk, 2014). After this fallout, Atsız and his ideology ceased to serve as a comprehensive ideological reference, becoming instead a respected but isolated motif within Turkish nationalism. His approach to religion and Islam, meanwhile, was rarely, if ever, discussed in nationalist politics for decades (Can, 2001; Aytürk, 2014).

As Türkeş and Taşer had anticipated, the MHP's electoral prospects improved in the 1970s. Competing with the rising Islamist MSP for the conservative nationalist electorate, the MHP's platform leaned heavily on an emotional campaign driven by strong religious and anti-Communist sentiments, offering few concrete policies or programs (Cizre, 1992; Can, 2001). And, this strategy ultimately helped them secure

⁷ In the 1965 general elections, the CKMP received only 2.2% of the votes, securing just 11 deputies—a significant decline from its 1961 performance when the party won 54 seats with 14% of the votes (Landau, 1982), and its performance in the senate elections was equally poor (Aytürk, 2014).

⁸ Coined by Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi, the Turkish-Islamic Ideal emerged as a response to the earlier concept of the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" proposed by another conservative nationalist intellectual, İbrahim Kafesoğlu. Arvasi argued that a synthesis is possible only between a thesis and its antithesis, and since the nation and religion were not contradictory concepts, he believed that the term "Ideal" better reflected their relationship than "Synthesis" (Can, 2001).

enough seats to participate in the Nationalist Front governments of 1975 and 1977.⁹ Moreover, with a foothold in the government, the MHP was able to place its cadres in various public offices and endear itself to the state establishment as a moderate actor (Landau, 1982; Bora, 2001). However, this stance was overshadowed when the MHP became inextricably linked with paramilitary violence in the late 1970s, as daily clashes erupted between radical left and right-wing groups. Many members of the *Ülkü Ocakları*, allegedly receiving paramilitary training in camps sponsored by the party, actively participated in these conflicts in the name of fighting Communism (Landau, 1981; Bora, 2001).

Following the escalating violence, the military seized control of the government in 1980. The military regime dissolved all political parties in the country, and the leaders of the prominent political parties were arrested. However, while the imprisonment of CHP leader Bülent Ecevit, AP leader Süleyman Demirel, and MSP leader Necmettin Erbakan was brief, Alparslan Türkeş remained in custody from 1980 to 1985. During this period, he, along with many members of the MHP and the *Ülkücü* movement, was tried in the “Trials of the MHP and the *Ülkücü* Organizations”¹⁰ for their part in the conflict (Landau, 1982). In their defense, Türkeş and other MHP officials claimed to have acted in accordance with their nationalist impulse. They believed that the *Ülkücüs*, as the aides of the state, had stepped up to the mission while the state was unable to effectively address the Communist threat (Bora, 2001; Vardar, 2002). This is why the military junta stripping them of this role and treating them on par with the radical leftists came as a profound shock to the MHP members. Finding themselves in an “ideological vacuum,” many *Ülkücü* militants turned to religion to make sense of their imprisonment and mistreatment by the state (Şensönmez, 2022, p. 9).

In fact, the party as a whole faced an identity crisis during the 1980s, leading to increased Islamization among its base, which was further fueled by the rising

⁹ Formed in 1975, the first Nationalist Front government was a coalition of the center-right *Adalet Partisi* (Justice Party - AP), the Islamist *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party - MSP), the Kemalist anti-Communist *Cumhuriyetçi Güven Partisi* (Republican Reliance Party - CGP), and the MHP. After the 1977 general elections, the second Nationalist Front government was established, again uniting the AP, MSP, and MHP. The Nationalist Front emerged from these parties' shared enmity toward Communism and their collective struggle against its influence.

¹⁰ While Türkeş was eventually found guilty of organized political crime in 1995, the case against him was dismissed due to time elapsed (Bora, 2001).

Islamist movement in Turkey and globally. Moreover, Radical Islam's strong anti-establishment sentiment had the potential to serve as a platform for the Ülkücüs to express their disappointment and frustration with the state (Can, 2001). These tendencies were eventually organized into a faction within the nationalist movement under the leadership of Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who were among the Ülkücü militants arrested and tortured in prison by the military regime. By this time, Türkeş had been released but remained banned from politics. Despite this, he and other former MHP members met several times to discuss reorganizing the Ülkücü movement under a new party. While some members suggested keeping a low profile for a period and joining center-right parties, the *Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi* (Nationalist Task Party - MÇP) was ultimately established in 1985 as the successor to the dissolved MHP. And, in 1987, after his ban from politics was lifted, Türkeş assumed its chairmanship. In 1993, the party was renamed the MHP, and its emblem was changed to three crescents again (Dural, 2016; Savaş & Zabun, 2023).

2.4.2. The 1990s and beyond: “A Brand New MHP”

The 1990s ushered in a transformative political environment for the nationalist movement, Turkey, and the broader world. While the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Communism as the primary enemy led to a brief period of soul-searching within the MHP, which was already in an ideological crisis after the 1980 coup, this void was quickly filled by the intensification of military conflicts with the separatist *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers Party - PKK) to unprecedented levels in the 1990s. Amid the rising nationalist reaction against PKK violence, the MHP found an opportunity to resolve its identity crisis by replacing Communism with the PKK as its new arch-enemy and to rehabilitate its image both in the eyes of the public and the state. By reasserting its role as a staunch ally of the state in the fight against the Kurdish separatist movement, the party also aimed to quell the rising anti-state and anti-regime sentiments within its ranks after the coup. Simultaneously, Türkeş cultivated a profile as a wise, mild, and constructive leader, unwaveringly supporting the state while also preventing extremist nationalists within his ranks from attacking civilian Kurds (Bora, 2001; Vardar, 2002).

Within this framework, they also distanced themselves from the growing political Islam of the time, instead shifting towards a more pan-Turkist and Atatürkist stance,

a change personally encouraged by Türkeş (Bora, 2001). Although the Ülkücü movement did not outright reject the Kemalist legacy even after solidifying its conservative nationalist outlook in 1969, it maintained a degree of distance from it. However, by the 1990s, Türkeş openly embraced Atatürk and his principles, asserting that the Ülkücü nationalist ideology was the true continuation of Atatürk's nationalism. In this rhetoric, Atatürk was hailed as the ultimate Turkish nationalist and pan-Turkist (Bora, 2001). With the departure of the Islamist nationalist faction led by Yazıcıoğlu in 1992, the then-MÇP leadership felt increasingly confident in their new embrace of the founding Republican principles (Yanardağ, 2002).

Tanıl Bora (2017) characterizes this period in Turkish history as one where various interpretations of Turkish nationalism increasingly interacted and intertwined, rather than clashing, thus amplifying its overall impact on society. As a result, nationalism became more popular, making the MHP's new moderate stance more attractive, especially to the rising number of urban nationalists. Since the 1980s, and particularly throughout the 1990s, Turkey's integration into the global capitalist system and the accompanying neoliberal development led to increased urbanization and the rise of the middle class. Feeling culturally and economically threatened by the Kurdish migrations into more economically developed cities in the West since the 1980s, the middle class in these cities displayed xenophobia and welfare chauvinism, further intensified by the strong nationalist sentiments stirred by the conflict with the PKK (Yanardağ, 2002; Bora, 2017). In response to this, the MHP capitalized on its modern and moderate image to attract these populations, even at the cost of alienating its traditional conservative rural base. Therefore, despite a strategically successful 1991 electoral alliance with the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party - RP), the successor to the Islamist MSP, which was framed as the “unification of believers,” Türkeş and his party later distanced themselves from the Islamist movement in Turkey, at times harshly criticizing it as “anti-national” (Çakır, 1991; Can, 2001)

In 1997, Alparslan Türkeş passed away, leading to a brief but intense struggle for leadership. Following its image transformation in the 1990s, the party became divided between the more modern, urban Ülkücüs and the traditional conservative cadres from central and eastern Anatolia. Ultimately, Devlet Bahçeli, an academic

who had served as an educator within the party, was elected chairman. In his early leadership, Bahçeli sought to strike a delicate balance between these two factions and electorates, honoring traditional values and organizational culture while also acknowledging the need for gradual modernization (Vardar, 2002; Çınar & Arıkan, 2002; Bora, 2017). In fact, Bahçeli adopted strategies similar to those of his predecessor, sharing the same determination to bring the MHP into the mainstream. However, he was more intense in terms of party discipline, even providing detailed guidelines on members' public conduct, including their greetings and attire to fit the new image created. While Bahçeli did not inherit the title *Başbuğ* from Türkeş, he similarly earned extraordinary reverence as the leader of the *Ülkücü* movement over time (Can, 2001; Çınar & Arıkan, 2002).

The rising tide of nationalism and the MHP's increasing appeal among different voter groups, combined with the political decline of the center-right parties, brought success to the MHP in the 1999 general elections. Under Bahçeli's leadership, the party became the second-largest in parliament by securing 17.98% of the votes and 129 seats, achieving the best election result in its history. The MHP leader became the deputy prime minister after entering into a coalition with the *Demokratik Sol Parti* (Democratic Left Party - DSP) and the *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party - ANAP).

However, tensions between the party's two distinct electorates persisted, preventing the MHP from pursuing policies that would fully satisfy either group. These internal challenges were compounded by a severe economic crisis and a devastating earthquake. In response, Bahçeli called for the dissolution of the coalition government and demanded snap elections in 2002. In those elections, the MHP could not make the 10% threshold, losing all its parliamentary representation as the newly founded AK Party secured a majority.

From 2002 until 2015, the MHP maintained a relatively stable rhetoric, unencumbered by governmental responsibilities, allowing it greater freedom in its actions. During this period, the party emerged as one of the most vocal critics of the AK Party government, particularly on issues related to EU relations and the Kurdish Initiative. In 2014, the MHP even formed an electoral alliance with the CHP, fielding a joint candidate against Erdoğan, who ultimately lost. The intensity of the MHP's

opposition to the AK Party government made the subsequent rapprochement between the two parties after 2015 perplexing to both MHP dissidents and outside observers.



CHAPTER 3

THE İYİ PARTY: FROM MHP DISSIDENTS TO A NEW POLITICAL FORCE

This chapter explores the historical development of the İYİ Party, tracing its developmental trajectory from 2015 to the present day. It begins with the intra-party conflict within the MHP that surfaced in 2015, setting the stage for the eventual emergence of the İYİ Party as an official political entity in 2017. Covering the key political milestones in the relatively short history of the İYİ Party, the chapter aims to locate the party in the broader landscape of contemporary Turkish politics and address discussions on its political stance in detail.

3.1. Breaking away from the MHP

After weeks of unsuccessful coalition negotiations, on November 1st, 2015, Turkish people went to the polls for the second general election in five months. Suffering a significant drop in its vote share, the MHP lost half of its 80 deputies elected in June (YSK, 2015a; YSK, 2015b), and even more importantly, for the first time in its history, it was outperformed by a pro-Kurdish political party, the HDP. As critical voices within the party started to rise on the very night of the election day, asking Devlet Bahçeli and his administration to take responsibility for this heavy loss, Bahçeli released a statement, adamantly telling everyone that he and his cadres would continue their duties as usual (Bahçeli, 2015). However, the voices of opposition would not settle down anytime soon. The Ülkücü community was deeply disappointed, frustrated, and buzzing with activity online and offline. By November 30th, three important figures within the opposition, Sinan Oğan, Koray Aydın, and Meral Akşener, had openly called for an extra-ordinary congress where the party

could discuss the election results and, more importantly, elect a new leader and a new administration. Unsurprisingly, all three announced their candidacy, too. Three months later, on February 24th, 2016, another prominent figure of the MHP, Ümit Özdağ, joined the opposition's call for a congress and, later in April, officially declared that he would run for the chairmanship as well.

While none of the candidates questioned the ideological position and overall policy direction of the MHP, they agreed that the party suffered from lack of intra-party democracy in decision-making which led to strategic mistakes and ultimately poor electoral performance.¹¹ However, above all, the opposition camp argued in unison that the leadership was fanning the flames by rejecting any demand for the deliberation and discussion of this “traumatic” election results which only made them more resolute in the idea that a change was necessary (“MHP’de Koray Aydın,” 2015). However, from the very beginning, it was evident to be a tricky process. Not only did the party headquarters repeatedly dismiss all calls for an early congress, but also the party by-laws did not allow any elections outside the ordinary congress, and the MHP organized its last ordinary congress in March of the same year, the next one having been scheduled for 2018. Therefore, the opposition focused all its efforts on changing the by-laws, and the candidates started collecting petitions from party delegates to organize an extraordinary congress where they would vote on the proposed change.

The inner turmoil in the MHP only grew after the opposition collected a sufficient number of signatures. As the party headquarters remained adamant that the congress would take place in 2018 as announced earlier and did not accept the petitions collected by the candidates, a lengthy legal battle began on February 15th, 2016, with the opposition taking the issue to court. Weeks passed with contradictory rulings from different courts, and both parties accused one another of being unlawful. Firstly, in early April, the Ankara 12th Civil Court of Peace ruled in favor of the

¹¹ Many argued at the time that the MHP's uncompromising attitude during the coalition negotiations after June 2015 was punished by the voters in November. During their campaign, both Akşener and Oğan complained that Bahçeli made every decision in this process without consulting anyone at the party (AksenerCenter, 2015; Oğan, 2015). Moreover, Özdağ emphasized that the MHP suffered from the lack of an efficient strategy for communicating its decisions to the electorate, while Aydın claimed that the MHP under Bahçeli was centered on obedience to “the one-man,” which prevented people in the movement from contributing to the party policies and decisions, ultimately resulting in electoral failure in November (CNN TÜRK, 2015; Par, 2016).

opposition, appointing a within-party committee that later announced the congress would be held on May 15th, 2016. Days later, two local Courts of First Instance in Tosya and Gemerek issued precautionary injunctions against this decision. This back-and-forth between Ankara and local courts continued for another round that ultimately created a legal impasse approaching May 15th. Although an impressive crowd of dissident delegates and members gathered for the congress on that day in Ankara, the city's governor and police force were also there, preventing entry to the hotel where the congress was supposed to take place, citing the local court decisions. After hours of waiting and tension, the opposition leaders decided to withdraw.

For Bahçeli's opponents, May 15th was the clearest sign of the AK Party's involvement in the matter. The pro-government media outlets had already been repeating Devlet Bahçeli's accusations against other candidates for some time ("MHP'de Paralel Gölgesi," 2016; "Teslim Olmayız," 2016). There were also statements from government officials portraying the early ruling that the party could hold a congress as "designing a political party with court decisions" (Arslan, 2016). Finally, the police intervention on May 15th solidified the opposition's view on the matter. When asked about the issue nine years later, Interviewee 6 (personal interview, 2024), who was one of the MHP dissidents then, still demonstrated the same conviction: "We had taken over MHP. Tayyip Erdoğan took it from us and returned it to Mr. Bahçeli. Otherwise, we had taken over it. You must have followed and known about those Tosya and Gemerek decisions and so on." Although the battle for the congress did not end with these local court decisions and, after a favorable decision by the Court of Appeals on May 24th, the opposition managed to hold an extraordinary congress on June 19th, changing the related articles on the by-laws, this victory was short-lived. The very same Court of Appeals annulled the congress a year later on June 20th, 2017.

The year leading up to this final decision was, however, eventful, to say the least. The coup attempt of July 15th, 2016, completely altered the political scene in Turkey and made the opposition movement within the MHP lose its momentum to a great extent. While Meral Akşener had already been accused of being the "political figure of the Fethullah Gülen movement" by Bahçeli the day after announcing her candidacy ("Bahçeli: Hepiniz Göreceksiniz," 2015), during the congress period, the

whole opposition camp was repeatedly portrayed by Bahçeli, his aides, and the media close to the AK Party and the MHP as part of a Gülenist plot to seize the party. As a result, not only was one of the judges ruling in favor of the opposition arrested with the charge of being a member of the now- *Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü* (Gülenist Terrorist Organization - FETÖ), but it was also later revealed that a FETÖ investigation was commenced about Meral Akşener during this period (“MHP’yi Karıştıran Hakim,” 2016; “Meral Akşener Hakkında,” 2019).

For the opposition, the momentum came back with the discussions on the presidential system, surprisingly brought up by Devlet Bahçeli in late 2016. Although Bahçeli had vehemently opposed the presidential system in the past, with the MHP’s support, the AK Party’s proposal on the constitutional amendment that would give President Erdoğan sweeping executive powers was accepted by the parliament in early 2017. Although the proposed system change was later approved by a small margin in the constitutional referendum held on April 16th, 2017, the referendum period rejuvenated the opposition, for Bahçeli’s alliance with the AK Party deepened the disagreements within the Ülkücü-nationalist circles. While Bahçeli framed this alliance with the ruling party as a unified stance for the preservation of the Turkish state and its people against the existential threat posed by FETÖ, critics within the opposition viewed it as reciprocation for the AK Party’s support during the leadership contest within the MHP (Rusen Cakir medyascope, 2017). In February 2017, all four candidates joined forces with other figures from the MHP and Ülkücü movement who opposed the proposed constitutional change, and they passionately campaigned against what they called a “one-man rule” under the platform “Turkish Nationalists Say No” (“MHP’li Muhaliflerden,” 2017). The whole campaign took place under the emergency law shortly established after the coup, where a widespread crackdown on Gülenists by the government swiftly expanded to the wider opposition, with investigations, arrests, and imprisonments having been carried out against other political groups, including the dissident nationalists (“Akşener’den Yeniçağ’a,” 2016). Moreover, on the campaign trail, there were many instances where the events organized by the platform were banned by the authorities or candidates were harassed or even, on some occasions, physically attacked (“MHP’den İhracı,” 2017; “Ümit Özdağ’a,” 2017).

3.2. Forming a New Path: The İYİ Party's Emergence

The period from 2015 to 2017 would later have an essential role in shaping the self-perception of the İYİ Party as “the movement of the brave.” All the ‘hardships’ they experienced in these two years would feed their rhetoric of courage, determination, and dedication to democracy and the rule of law against an authoritarian regime and its apparatus. Indeed, both during the congress process and referendum period, candidates and their supporters had put up a collective and collaborative struggle, leading many to wonder whether this would turn into a political movement and/or a party as early as July 2016. However, the immediate aftermath of the referendum was the first moment when the disillusionment with the MHP reached such an extent that in some circles of the Ülkücü-nationalist community, public discussions on the necessity of a new party began for the first time (“Ülkücüler Artık Yeni,” 2017). On the one hand, the ‘No’ campaign losing, albeit by a small margin, in the referendum decreased the prospects of gaining control of the MHP and ‘correcting’ the party’s position even more. On the other hand, the majority of the MHP supporters voted ‘No’ in the referendum,¹² and they could potentially be the primary electoral base for a new party. Moreover, a notable organizational capacity had accumulated for two years since those who threw in their lot with the opposition were purged from the MHP as well, and they were in need of a new purpose.

As Meral Akşener was the first candidate to be expelled from the MHP on September 8th, 2016,¹³ there were already speculations that she would lead a new party even before the referendum (“Meral Akşener Yeni,” 2016). However, it was more than timing that put Akşener one step ahead of the other candidates when it came to the leadership of this new political movement. Meral Akşener was already a known political figure from her time as the Interior Minister during a turbulent time in Turkish politics when the government she served in was forced to resign by a military ultimatum on February 28th, 1997, in what came to be known as the

¹² The opposition camp insisted that the vast majority of the MHP base (ranging from 80 to 90 percent, according to their claims) voted “No” in the referendum. Indeed, the “Yes” vote in April 2017 was ten percentage points lower than the combined vote of the AK Party and the MHP in the November 2015 elections. However, according to KONDA’s 2017 opinion poll, 55 percent of the MHP voters voted “No” in the referendum, while 40 percent voted “Yes” (Özbey, 2018).

¹³ Following Akşener, Ümit Özdağ was expelled from the party on November 15th, 2016. Although both appealed this decision, the court rejected their appeals, and their expulsion was finalized in December 2016. Later, on March 10th, 2017, Sinan Oğan was expelled from the MHP, with his expulsion being finalized in July 2017.

“postmodern coup.” However, her popularity reached its peak when she was the Deputy Speaker of the parliament from the MHP between 2007 and 2015. During her tenure, the unceremonious, sincere, and firm manner with which she governed the parliamentary sessions would often make the national media, while the compilation of those moments would receive millions of views online.¹⁴ Meanwhile, it seems that as Akşener’s profile rose, her relationship with Devlet Bahçeli soured. There were news stories as early as 2012 portraying Akşener as a potential and powerful rival to Bahçeli and reporting that the relationship between the two was complicated because of this (“Bahçeli’ye Karşı Sürpriz,” 2012). Later, her name was often discussed in the media as a potential candidate for both the 2014 presidential elections and the speakership of the parliament after the June 2015 elections. All this attention resulted in a very public reaction by Bahçeli where he answered a reporter’s question on Akşener’s potential candidacy for the speakership:

I don’t like the names that are repeated like this, and I eliminate those names. You should know that if you use Meral Akşener’s name too often, she will be excluded. We have 80 deputies, [but] it’s Meral Akşener in everything. This means that there is something else going on here. (“Bahçeli Meral Akşener’i,” 2015)

Indeed, for the following general elections in November, Meral Akşener was not nominated as a deputy by Devlet Bahçeli. After the elections, many political pundits cited people’s reaction to Akşener’s elimination as one of the reasons for the significant drop in the MHP’s votes (Onuş, 2015). While the rest of the candidates were well-known political figures in their own right (For instance, Koray Aydın was a former Minister, and both Ümit Özdağ and Koray Aydın formally challenged Devlet Bahçeli for the chairmanship in the past), Akşener’s popularity was arguably higher at the time and grew even more during the referendum campaign, not to mention the fact that she was an assertive female politician in the male-dominated environment of Ülkücü-nationalist politics, which had attracted the attention of many. In addition, compared to other candidates, her eclectic political background helped her to present herself as a leader who can connect with different segments of

¹⁴ For an example, see the YouTube video *Meral Akşener’in En Samimi Halleri* (mümtaz, 2014) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIJWc6AUFWg>

society.¹⁵ All of these can be seen in how she was portrayed in the national and international media at the time. Some described her as “the MHP’s westward-looking face” (Şenay, 2015). Others saw her as a defiant she-wolf¹⁶ “who refused to be co-opted or silenced” by Erdoğan’s oppressive regime (Jacinto, 2017) and gave her the moniker “Turkey’s Iron Lady” (Malsin, 2017). However, all agreed that Akşener had the background and credentials to appeal to a wider electorate than the Ülkücü-nationalist base of the MHP, which was also admitted by Ümit Özdağ and Koray Aydın, who became Akşener’s top officials in the new party despite having competed against her for the MHP leadership a few months ago (NOW Haber, 2017; Özbey, 2017).¹⁷

As mentioned above, the annulment of the constitution congress held by the opposition on June 20th, 2017, which effectively ended the internal struggle within the MHP, was the last turning point in Akşener’s and her companions’ journey of establishing a new party. On July 3rd, Akşener said that she had closed the MHP

¹⁵ According to her own account, Akşener was interested and involved in Ülkücü-nationalist politics throughout her high school and university years thanks to the influence of her older brother, a well-known figure in the Ülkücü community and a former provincial chair of MHP Kocaeli in the late 1970s (Melek, 2022). However, her political career officially began when she joined the center-right DYP in 1994. Only two years later, Akşener became Turkey’s first (and to this day only) female Minister of Interior during a particularly turbulent period in Turkish politics. After the February 28th National Security Council decisions targeting the coalition government between her party and the Islamist RP, Akşener was one of the few political figures at the time who openly spoke and took action against a military intervention which she anticipated was coming (“28 Şubat’ta,” 2015; Onuş, 2018; Kalkan, 2022). Her “brave” and “democratic” stance against the military was praised in Islamist circles and most likely played a role in her joining the Reformists within the RP’s successor, the Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*-FP) after she resigned from the DYP in July 2001. At the time, Akşener explained her decision, “I was an Ülkücü in the past, but I do not regret it (...) Today, I define myself as an individual whose democratic side stands out” (“Akşener: Ülkücüydüm,” 2001). However, her involvement only lasted for a month, and she announced her departure in August 2001, stating that the new movement did not match the “vision of Turkey she thought and dreamed of” (“Akşener Yenilikçilerden Koptu,” 2001) and only three months after that, she joined the MHP. In her later statements on the issue, Akşener claimed that during the discussions on the content of party documents, there were reservations within the movement about how much emphasis should be put on ‘Turkishness’, which she could not have accepted.

¹⁶ The she-wolf (*Asena* in Turkish) is a mythological creature that saves the ancestors of the Turks from extermination by nursing a 10-year-old boy who is the only surviving member of his peoples after an enemy attack (Bora & Can, 2004). The rising influence of Pan-Turkism in the Ülkücü-nationalist movement in the 1990s, combined with the impact of the feminist wave of the time, led many women in the movement to start identifying themselves as *Asena* (Tokdoğan, 2012). To this day, *Asena* has been commonly used in Turkish political jargon to refer to an Ülkücü-nationalist woman.

¹⁷ When questioned on the issue by a journalist in August 2017, Özdağ answered (Özbey, 2017), “Yes, I had some aspirations in politics. We worked with Ms. Akşener within the MHP for a certain period. She is a politician I greatly admire. During the congress period, we became rivals. (...) However, after April 16th, it was finally time to establish a party. Ms. Akşener has more political experience and connects with the masses better than I do. Honestly, there was only one thing for me to do: to support Ms. Akşener as fully as I possibly can. That’s what I’m doing now.”

chapter of her life, and for the first time, she openly spoke about a new party without giving much detail (“Akşener: MHP defteri,” 2017). On August 22nd, the only candidate who had not been expelled by that time, Koray Aydın resigned from the MHP and announced that he would join Akşener and Özdağ.¹⁸ Finally, after several weeks of preparation, on October 25th, 2017, the İYİ Party was officially founded, with Meral Akşener as its chair. The name of the party, “İYİ,” which literally means ‘good’ in Turkish, was also a reference to the seal logo of the *Kayı*, a medieval Turkic tribe that is believed to be the ancestor of Ottoman Turkish rulers. Similarly, the party’s logo, a yellow sun with eight rays encircling it, was explained as a reference to the sun’s role in Turkish mythology and history (“İYİ Parti’nin Güneş,” 2017).

Beyond these symbolic references, the founding ceremony placed significant emphasis on “being called to duty by the people.” In her speech, Akşener lauded the Turkish people’s dedication to democracy, highlighting how they have navigated political challenges throughout the Republic’s history and how they now look to the İYİ Party for helping them to do the same today. “Our people have decided to clear Turkey’s path (...) with a new political movement, with a new power. We gathered here today to proclaim this mission we have undertaken on behalf of the people,” Akşener declared on October 25th (“Meral Akşener İYİ,” 2017). As will be seen in the next section, “the people” remained a lynchpin of the party’s discourse for the following seven years. Akşener and other party members have consistently emphasized that it was the people who founded the party, with their role being merely to put up a sign over the party building. As a result, the party has implicitly presented itself as the embodiment of the Turkish people, and listening to the people’s voices and acting on their will has become the primary justification behind all their strategies, policies, and decisions.

3.3. The İYİ Party’s Journey: A Timeline

While it has been only seven years since the İYİ Party’s establishment, these seven

¹⁸ Despite campaigning together with the other candidates during the referendum, Sinan Oğan did not join the new party. In his statement on the issue in June 2017, Oğan was in favor of continuing the fight inside the MHP and defended waiting for the party’s ordinary congress. He argued that everyone should settle their accounts first at the MHP congress, and only then a new party should be discussed based on the outcome of that congress (“Bahçeli’ye Muhalif İsimler,” 2017).

years have unfolded with a drama and intensity that rivals, if not surpasses, the party's turbulent split from the MHP. During these years, the party has navigated peaks and troughs, grappling with internal disputes, securing another election victory, enduring a bitter fallout with the CHP, and facing the end of Akşener's leadership. In this section, I will explore this journey in detail to better understand the experiences and motivations that shape the İYİ Party's political identity.

3.3.1 The 2018 Snap Elections and the İYİ Party's Early Rise to Prominence

Immediately after the party's establishment, Akşener started her travels across the country. Usually, these visits included the opening of the provincial party branches followed by small rallies, a tour of important streets of the city, and visits to small shops on these streets (Uzunoğlu & Yılmaz, 2019). Being among the people and making direct contact with them were extensions of Akşener and her party's people-centrist discourse explained above. Over time, this campaigning style would become a cornerstone of Akşener's brand of politics. However, at the time, Akşener likely saw this as her only option. While the next general elections were scheduled for November 2019, many, including Akşener, were anticipating a snap election. As such, the İYİ Party had very limited time to introduce its politicians, program, and overall political stance to the masses. However, more importantly, the party had to fulfill the legal requirements for competing in elections. At the time, to be considered eligible by the *Yüksek Seçim Kurulu* (Supreme Election Council - YSK), the İYİ Party had to either finish organizing in at least half of Turkey's provinces at least six months before the election day and then hold its big congress or have a parliamentary group in the TBMM.¹⁹

A few weeks after the formation of the *Cumhur İttifakı* (People's Alliance)²⁰ between the AK Party and the MHP for the coming presidential and general elections, in April, it was announced that a snap election would take place on June 24th, 2018. The

¹⁹ However, the said regulation was changed in 2022, and having a parliamentary group is no longer sufficient for competing in elections in Turkey (Çelikbaş, 2022).

²⁰ Right after the formation of the People's Alliance, the AK Party and the MHP introduced a bill to the parliament aiming to legalize electoral alliances between two or more political parties without having to enter the elections under one party's list. Moreover, the bill proposed that the 10% electoral threshold be applied to the alliances instead of individual parties, meaning that any political party within the alliance would be considered above the threshold as long as the alliance took over 10% of the votes. Three weeks after its introduction to the parliament, the changes in the electoral system were approved on March 13th, 2018 ("Seçim İttifakına İlişkin," 2018).

government was concerned about its popularity eroding under continuously deteriorating economic conditions and hoped to catch the opposition unprepared, especially the İYİ Party, whose eligibility to enter the elections would come into question (Çarkoğlu & Yıldırım, 2019; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2019; Gerim, 2023). Compared to the AK Party-MHP front, the opposition was indeed underprepared. Although some preliminary meetings took place earlier on the issue, more concrete talks on the nature of a possible electoral alliance among opposition parties started only after the election date was announced. As a result, first, 15 deputies from the main opposition CHP resigned and joined the İYİ party on April 22nd. This way, the İYİ party would have sufficient deputies for a parliamentary group, enabling them to participate in the elections and nominate Meral Akşener for the presidency without fulfilling any additional requirements. Finally, on May 5th, the *Millet İttifakı* (Nation Alliance), comprised of the CHP, the İYİ Party, the *Saadet Partisi* (Felicity Party - Saadet), and the *Demokrat Parti* (Democrat Party-DP) was formed.

However, a similar agreement could not be achieved on a joint presidential candidate. Akşener and her party had serious reservations about nominating former President Abdullah Gül, on whom the CHP and the Saadet reportedly agreed. Rounds of “persuasion” talks between the CHP, the Saadet, and Akşener (Gül, 2018, p. 1) proved fruitless, and opposition parties ultimately decided to field their own candidates. On several occasions, Akşener explained her decision as a move against imposing Abdullah Gül on the opposition voters, especially considering his low popularity among the CHP supporters. This, she believed, would only benefit Erdoğan, who would prefer Gül as an easy rival. Moreover, Akşener was adamant about running for the presidency since the establishment of her party, considering this as “her promise to the people” (Elibol, 2018, p. 11). Akşener framed her and her party’s stance during these negotiations as doing what is necessary for winning the election and, by extension, for the good of the Turkish people, whom she claimed to put above any alliance earlier in April (“İYİ Parti’de Kurultay,” 2018). This strong emphasis on “the people” could be observed in Akşener’s nomination process as well. Even though she was already eligible to run in the race, Akşener instead decided to collect signatures from the people for her candidacy, which would make her “the first president who was nominated by the people themselves,” she argued (Akşener, 2018).

Despite the uneven playing field and the additional pressures on the opposition under the state of emergency, most political pundits and opinion polls predicted a runoff in the presidential elections. The İYİ Party, too, was expected to perform well. Although the opinion polls showed declining support from May to June, on average, both Akşener and the İYİ Party were expected to win at least 10% of the vote just before the elections. Moreover, since January 2018, the polls showed the İYİ Party consistently performing better than the MHP (Çarkoğlu & Yıldırım, 2019). However, election results proved otherwise. In the first round of the presidential elections, Erdoğan won with 52.6% of the vote, while Akşener received only 7.29%, falling behind her own party (YSK, 2018a). The İYİ Party managed to get 9.96% and gained 43 deputies in the TBMM (YSK, 2018b; YSK, 2018c); however, it was surprisingly behind the MHP, which had been expected to lose a significant portion of its support to the İYİ Party and remain below the 10% electoral threshold before the elections. Nevertheless, despite falling behind their expectations, the İYİ Party actually achieved notable support for a splinter party that had to build its identity from scratch in an extremely polarized political arena. Considering the commonly poor performance of such parties in Turkish political history since the 1980s (Duran, 2017), the party nearly passed the electoral threshold,²¹ earned the much-needed Treasury aid given to political parties, and formed a parliamentary group, allowing Akşener to speak her party's position and policies to the public in weekly group meetings.

3.3.2. Navigating Success and Turmoil (2018-2023)

The next two years of the party after the 2018 elections were marked by ups and downs. The weeks following the election passed amidst intra-party rifts. As the party members hoped for a stronger showing in the elections, criticisms rose against Akşener's leadership from within the party and escalated to the point where she declared an extraordinary congress and that she would not run for the chairmanship in this congress. Although Akşener was convinced to come back²² and elected for

²¹ With changes in the electoral system only a few months before the elections, the İYİ Party gained 43 deputies even though it could not clear the electoral threshold.

²² Immediately after Akşener's announcement on July 22nd, Koray Aydın stated in a TV program that they stand with their leader and no one in the party "would dare to run for the chairmanship" ("Son Dakika," 2018). The next day, the İYİ Party's district branches in İstanbul organized a sit-in in front of Akşener's house in Üsküdar, where the party members declared that they would wait there until Akşener changed her mind. Meanwhile, the top party officials continued their efforts to convince

another term, the turmoil continued. From late June to the local elections in March 2019, over 20 founding members resigned from the party, citing similar grievances against the party administration, such as lack of intra-party democracy, disloyalty against the founding cadres in both deputy nominations and local organization, lack of commitment to the promise of being the party of the women and the youth, and the framing of the disappointing election results by the headquarters as a success. Nevertheless, a renewed electoral alliance between the CHP and the İYİ Party for the local elections, which also gained the tacit support of the HDP in metropolitan cities,²³ resulted in the opposition's biggest win against Erdoğan and the AK Party since 2002. More importantly, the opposition gained two new potential leaders in newly elected mayors Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, who respectively won the İstanbul and Ankara municipalities, which, for 25 years, had been under the rule of first the Islamist RP and then the AK Party.

Unsurprisingly, the local elections of 2019 raised the profile of the whole opposition, including the İYİ Party, which had dramatically fallen after June 2018. This increase in popularity was made more visible by Devlet Bahçeli's multiple calls to the İYİ Party and its members to return to the MHP. In August 2019, accusing the party administration of collaborating with the HDP, Bahçeli called for a unification, addressing the 'discontented' members who he claimed were "physically in the İYİ Party but mentally in the MHP" (Bahçeli, 2019). Later in 2020, although Bahçeli continued his invitations, his tone softened, and for the first time, he openly addressed Meral Akşener herself. Referring to Akşener's support in the Hagia Sophia's conversion back to a mosque in July 2020, Bahçeli claimed that the İYİ Party leader should not continue to be a part of the Alliance of Disgrace²⁴ and "return home" ("Akşener'den Bahçeli'nin," 2020). Days later, Erdoğan stated that he found Bahçeli's invitations reasonable as "holding hands with terrorist organizations does

Akşener in small face-to-face meetings behind closed doors. Later, during the congress, Akşener explained her decision to return as such: "The tradition spoke, the khan fell silent. I bowed to your will. You said, 'Come back!' and I came back" (Ayhan & Alatan, 2018).

²³ For the local elections, the HDP did not field candidates for many of the metropolitan areas, including Ankara and İstanbul, and instead focused its campaign on the party's strongholds in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.

²⁴ Since its formation, the Nation Alliance has been consistently referred to as the Alliance of Disgrace by Bahçeli, with an apparent word play between *millet* (nation) and *zillet* (disgrace, shame) (Bahçeli, 2018). This phrasing was later adopted by Erdoğan and the AK Party as well.

not suit the İYİ Party, which [they considered to be] local and national.”²⁵ This was followed by yet another call by Bahçeli for Akşener to “return home” in late 2020, and Akşener continued to reject each invitation with lighthearted and sometimes mocking posts on social media which further raised her and her party’s profile, creating the image of a highly sought after player in Turkish politics.

However, in 2020, the party also experienced the second most turbulent period in its history since the 2018 elections, which started with the second ordinary congress held in September and ended with the expulsion of one of the party’s most influential figures, Ümit Özdağ, in November. In the days following the party’s congress on September 20th, it was alleged that a secret list had been distributed to some delegates instructing them not to vote for the names written in it for the General Executive Board elections. In the ensuing arguments, several deputies decided to boycott the party’s parliamentary sessions. Not long after this, in October, Ümit Özdağ suggested in a television interview that his party gave hidden support to the HDP candidates in some regions for the local elections and shared his suspicions against the İYİ Party’s head of the İstanbul branch, Buğra Kavuncu, claiming that Kavuncu’s involvement with a Gulenist NGO in Kazakhstan cannot be overlooked.

²⁵ Tanıl Bora identifies the phrase *yerli ve milli* (local and national) as “the strongest expression” and the “symbol” of post-2015 nationalism in Turkey under the AK Party-MHP alliance. Currently, being “local and national” serves as the ultimate measure of someone’s acceptability or desirability to the regime and, by implication, to the Turkish people whom the regime claims to embody (Kıraathane İstanbul Edebiyat Evi, 2020). The term was first used in the current context by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the campaign trail for the November 2015 elections when he asked the crowd to “send 550 local [and] national deputies” to the parliament in one of his rallies (“Erdoğan: 1 Kasım’da,” 2015). The concept of “local and national” is certainly not coined by Erdoğan, and localness and its connections with nationalism have been discussed in different ideological circles from time to time since the early Republican period. However, as Bora contends, it had never been as pervasive, dominant, and passionately embraced as it is today. In its most straightforward interpretation, combining “localness” with nationalism bolsters someone’s nationalist credentials in contemporary Turkish politics (Kıraathane İstanbul Edebiyat Evi, 2020). Ideologically, the emphasis on the superiority of localness is similar to the nativist thought championed by today’s populist nationalist actors worldwide (Kasaba, 2018). In that, “localness” denotes what is “authentic” and “organic.” It is an identity that can be possessed and internalized by only a specific group of people who are native to the land, country, and culture. In the Turkish context, Islam forms the core of this culture and identity. Based on this, the pairing of “local” and “national” implies a type of nationalism that is peculiar to Muslim Turkish people, a nationalism that is unique to “us” and to this land, ancient, and therefore completely different from the modernist Western national movements that are seen as unnatural and dangerous for Turkish people. Aside from these anti-Westernist and Islamist sentiments, Bora argues that the distinguishing component of today’s “local and national” brand of nationalism under the AK Party is the glorification of the state to the point that each member’s existence is fused in and made meaningful by the state. Consequently, those who are not deemed “local and national” are considered not only the apparatus of external powers threatening Turkish culture but also enemies to the state and, thus, to the Turkish people as a whole (Kıraathane İstanbul Edebiyat Evi, 2020). In this context, Akşener’s and the İYİ Party’s recognition as “local and national” had the potential to significantly enhance the party’s appeal among the AK Party’s and MHP’s nationalist conservative base.

Days later, the office of the chief public prosecutor in İstanbul opened a FETÖ investigation about Kavuncu (“İYİ Parti’li Buğra,” 2020) while an uproar began within the party. The boycotting deputies returned to the parliamentary meetings in a spirit of solidarity, and all 81 provincial heads of the party petitioned the headquarters for disciplinary action on Özdağ. Eventually, in November, Özdağ was expelled from the party. Although his expulsion was later found unlawful by the court, and he returned to the party, in March 2021, he definitively left the İYİ Party, announcing his resignation.²⁶

Thus, 2021 started with the loss of a high-profile figure who had been at the forefront with Akşener since 2016, while the party also had to fight against the perception of being plagued with turmoil. Nevertheless, these developments did not seem to have dramatically affected Akşener’s and the İYİ Party’s image. At the time, Akşener had been traveling across Turkey and visiting different cities since early 2020, and her trademark heart-to-heart conversations with people about their grievances against the government often made the news, contributing to her popularity. This was also the time when Akşener started to the practice of “Nation’s Podium” where she invited ordinary people to speak for five to ten minutes during the party’s weekly group meetings. Aiming to provide an alternative platform for those whom she claimed were not heard by the media or the government, Akşener asked these people who came from different segments of society to speak about their problems and demands. All of this effort was reflected in the party’s standing in opinion polls as well as the number of official İYİ Party members. Polls conducted throughout 2021 and 2022 showed an overall increase, with the İYİ Party reaching as high as 18% in late 2022 (“KONDA Anketi,” 2022). Moreover, in this period, the party almost doubled the number of its members from 266,440 to 512,543 and, for the first time since its establishment, surpassed the MHP in January 2022, thus becoming the third largest party in Turkey member-wise after the AK Party and the CHP (Yargıtay Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığı, 2020, 2022).

²⁶ Özdağ stood behind all of his allegations against Akşener and the İYİ party during the press conference where he announced his resignation, declaring that it was not possible for him to be in the same party as those who had been the founders and executives of Gülenist NGOs, those who sat at the same table with the HDP, those who remained silent against the hidden invasion of Turkey by Syrian refugees, and those who deceived Atatürkists and Turkish nationalists (Özden & Çimen, 2021). Five months later, in July 2021, he officially founded the *Zafer Partisi* (Victory Party - ZP). The party defines itself as a Turkish nationalist party “on the line of Atatürk” (Zafer Partisi, 2021), and since its establishment, its propaganda has almost exclusively relied on anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Simultaneously, the public debate on potential alliances and presidential candidates had been going on since the municipal elections, and the idea of forming a front as unified as possible against the AK Party and the MHP had almost turned into an unquestioned common sense within the opposition camp. Two new parties, The *Gelecek Partisi* (Future Party - GP) and the *Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi* (Democracy and Progress Party - DEVA), were established in this period by former AK Party executives Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan respectively, which was speculated by many political commentators to be a potential alternative to the disenchanted conservative voters coming from the AK Party (Esen, Gümüşçü, & Yavuzylmaz, 2023). Comparing the results of the 2018 and 2019 elections, Akşener, too, stated several times that the opposition should agree on a joint candidate before the next general elections and argued in favor of expanding the Nation Alliance by adding the two new parties. Expectedly, party leaders and committees often met during this period. Following these meetings, the six opposition parties (the CHP, the İYİ Party, the Saadet, the DP, the GP, and the DEVA) first signed a joint political manifesto expressing their goal to establish what they called a ‘consolidated parliamentary system’ after the elections in February 2022, then began to meet monthly to discuss a common post-elections political agenda.

During this period, the six opposition leaders, who were now informally referred to as “The Table of Six” by the media, repeatedly expressed their desire to agree on a joint candidate. However, the identity of that candidate remained uncertain for the entirety of 2022. The CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had been publicly hinting at his intention to run for the presidency since early 2021. Against this, Akşener and the İYİ Party insisted on choosing the candidate with the highest chance to win against Erdoğan (Halktv, 2021; “‘Kılıçdaroğlu’nun adaylığı’ iddialarına’,” 2021), implying the two highly popular mayors.²⁷ Nevertheless, as Akşener later revealed, the leaders had not formally discussed the candidate’s identity until their last meeting in March 2023, which was only two months before the elections (Altaylı, 2023), and it remains unclear why Akşener herself did not raise the issue in the meetings up until that point.

²⁷ Between 2021 and 2023, both mayors were predicted to win against Erdoğan in several opinion polls (“Son Anket Geldi,” 2021; “Yöneylem Araştırma Anketi,” 2022; “Anket: Üç Aday, 2023). Akşener, too, stated that she heard the names of İmamoğlu and Yavaş from the people everywhere she went during her travels (Altaylı, 2023).

According to Akşener's account of events, she expected the last meeting to be about discussing the potential candidates and how to select among them. Having been prepared to present İmamoğlu and Yavaş's name, Akşener was planning to propose that the eventual candidate should be selected based on the overall result of the opinion polls that would be conducted by different polling companies. However, she was blindsided when the talks suddenly turned to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy, with the other leaders aside from Akşener nominating Kılıçdaroğlu in unison. The disagreement ultimately culminated in Akşener leaving the Table on March 3rd, 2023, after which she gave a fiery speech and described Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy as a "trap," then called on Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş to step up and assume "the duty" given to them by the people (Anka Haber Ajansı, 2023). In fact, Akşener's reasons for objecting to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy were very similar to her stance against Abdullah Gül in 2018. In that, she considered both of them unlikely to win against Erdoğan and, for her, imposing them on the electorate would mean succumbing to elite politics and betraying the people's will. However, this time, Akşener's uncompromising attitude was met with much heavier criticism in the media and provoked a strong reaction from the party's base, with numerous ordinary members resigning from the İYİ Party.²⁸ Under this pressure, an intense three-day negotiation ensued. During this period, a compromise was reached where Akşener agreed to a solution that saw the two mayors campaign as vice presidential candidates alongside the leaders of the five other parties at the Table, including herself (El, 2023). Ultimately, the campaign officially began on March 6th when Kılıçdaroğlu announced his candidacy in a speech with the five leaders standing behind him.²⁹

Despite this very public showdown at the beginning and the pressures under an increasingly competitive authoritarian regime, the opposition was widely expected to win both the presidency and the parliamentary majority in the elections. The economic downturn, ongoing since 2018, was at its peak, and this, coupled with the shock and destruction caused by a major earthquake earlier in February, posed the most challenging campaigning period Erdoğan and the AK Party had faced since

²⁸ From January 2023 to January 2024, the İYİ Party lost one-sixth of its members, with more than 100,000 people resigning within a year ("Siyasi Partilerin Üye," 2024). However, it still maintains its position as the third largest political party in Turkey member-wise.

²⁹ Although Akşener eventually agreed to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy, her dissatisfaction was evident on her face during the CHP leader's speech.

2002 (Esen et al., 2023). Additionally, the opposition municipalities, particularly the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, demonstrated competent governance over the past four years, which could have significantly improved the opposition's overall credibility. Ultimately, though, Akşener's concerns were validated as Kılıçdaroğlu failed to defeat Erdoğan, who secured victory in the runoff with 52.18% (YSK, 2023a). Meanwhile, the İYİ Party garnered 9.69% of the vote and gained the same number of deputies (43 seats) as it did in 2018 despite its strong standing in the opinion polls, which had reached 18% only a few months earlier (YSK, 2023b, YSK, 2023c). During an interview in September 2023, Akşener lamented that it was the opposition, including the İYİ Party, who handed over the victory to Erdoğan and acknowledged that their departure from and return to the Table cost them about 10 percent of their previous support (Altaylı, 2023).

3.3.3. The Fallout of the Nation's Alliance and the End of Akşener's Era

The year that followed the May 2023 elections remains the most significant chapter in the İYİ Party's history thus far, culminating in the end of Meral Akşener's almost seven-year tenure as the party chair in late April 2024. After the 2023 elections, disappointment and anger took hold within the opposition camp, particularly the İYİ Party. Akşener and the İYİ Party members claimed that not only were their warnings against Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy ignored, but they also faced unfair accusations, including collusion with the AK Party, from the pro-opposition media, which they perceived as being closely linked with the CHP. Beyond anger and frustration, a deep sense of disappointment was evident among party members, including Akşener, who claimed to have "sadly" realized in this process that the pro-opposition and pro-government media were, in fact, one and the same (Altaylı, 2023). The psychological barrier this has set on party members' minds against the CHP and the wider opposition was observable during my fieldwork and interviews as well. For instance, one of my respondents described the attitude against the İYİ Party in this period as "leftist fascism" and continued:

What was the fundamental claim of the Table of Six, for example? They were going to save Turkey from all these anti-democratic practices. But their attitude was completely contradictory to this claim. I mean it is extremely reasonable, "Let's ask the people [about the candidate]." The fact that such a reasonable

demand was lynched. . . Facing this really made me realize, “It’s not going to work like this. Turkey won’t be democratic under this mentality either.

(Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

The strained relationship became more evident at the party’s ordinary congress in June 2023. Akşener declared that transferring deputies from the CHP in 2018 was her “biggest regret,” as it made them the CHP’s “tail” (Halktv, 2023). These remarks were followed by yet another invitation by Devlet Bahçeli in early August to join the ranks of the People’s Alliance for local elections³⁰ (CNN TÜRK, 2023), making many wonder which route the İYİ Party would follow. In the following months, Akşener and her aides made clear their intention to compete with their own candidates in the upcoming local elections, adopting the motto of a “free and independent” İYİ Party. In line with their people-centrist rhetoric, party members repeatedly justified their decision by claiming that this is actually what the people wanted and expected of them. They argued that making alliances and forming two big camps had not only deepened the polarization but also blurred the differences among the political parties, all of which ultimately benefited the AK Party. Claiming the election results actually showed public frustration with this system, party members committed themselves to offering a “third way” for Turkish voters. Moreover, resenting the HDP’s external support for the Nation Alliance and Kılıçdaroğlu, the İYİ Party claimed that the pressure to achieve the majority created room for marginal separatist actors such as the HDP³¹ to legitimize themselves. Ultimately, the party’s governing bodies formally voted against forming an electoral alliance twice, in September and December, solidifying this policy direction for the local elections.

However, in the end, these decisions only fanned the flames of an already brewing internal chaos. Frustrated by the candidacy crisis and the subsequent election results,

³⁰ Through one of his aides, Bahçeli sent a short statement to a TV program, addressing the İYİ Party as the following: “We called you home, you did not return. Let us be neighbors in local government” (CNN TÜRK, 2023).

³¹ In 2021, the HDP faced a lawsuit for closure. As of September 2024, the final decision has yet to be made on the case. However, to avoid the risk of being closed just before the 2023 elections, HDP candidates competed under the banner of the *Yeşiller ve Sol Gelecek Partisi* (Greens and the Left Future Party – YSP). After the elections, The Greens held an extraordinary congress where the party name was changed to the *Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi* (Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party - DEM Party). Today, the DEM Party is seen as the HDP’s successor in terms of its political position and agenda.

several former officials had already resigned by July. Additionally, since before the elections, some party members had been openly accusing the party administration of selling top spots on the deputy candidate lists to guarantee the person's election, accepting unregistered 'donations,' and nepotism ("Ümit Dikbayır'dan," 2023; Kırac, 2023; Şahanoğlu, 2023; Yaşar, 2023), which led to further resignations and expulsions after the elections. On top of these issues, the decision not to form an alliance risked the opposition's control over key municipalities of Ankara and İstanbul, and this resulted in even more criticism against the İYİ Party from within and without. Arguing that this would only benefit the AK Party, many people from the governing bodies of the İYİ Party, as well as Ankara and İstanbul branches, resigned during this period. Thus, the İYİ Party experienced a particularly challenging and tense campaign period for the local elections. Meanwhile, Akşener and the party officials maintained a, for lack of a better word, 'good riddance' attitude against those who resigned and accused them of being intimidated by the opposition media or even bribed by the Ankara and İstanbul municipalities. As a result of all these issues, from June 2023 to March 2024, the İYİ Party made the headlines almost daily with corruption allegations, its feud with the CHP, and continuous departures from the party rather than its policy agenda or campaign promises. This significantly hurt the party's public image, leading to its poorest performance in any election since its establishment. In March 2024, the İYİ Party was able to carry only one provincial municipality, Nevşehir, while taking only 3.77 % of the overall votes. On the other hand, the CHP managed to maintain the İstanbul and Ankara municipalities without the İYİ Party's official support –though it is speculated that most İYİ Party supporters voted for İmamoğlu and Yavaş instead of their own candidate - and even surpassed the AK Party, becoming the country's first party for the first time in decades.

Table 2 The İYİ Party's electoral performance over the years

	2018 Parliamentary Elections	2018 Presidential Elections	2019 Local Elections*	2023 Parliamentary Elections	2024 Local Elections
Votes (%)	9.96	7.29	7.45	9.69	3.77

*It should be noted that during the 2019 local elections, the İYİ Party did not compete in 13 metropolitan and 16 province municipalities and instead supported the CHP candidates ("İYİ Parti Aday," 2019), which could have potentially impacted the party's overall vote share.

Source: Author's compilation from YSK (2018a, 2018b, 2023a, 2023b) and Yavuz and Koç (2024)

Earlier in March, Akşener acknowledged that they had taken a considerable risk by entering the elections independently and promised to quit politics in case of failure (Halktv, 2024). Accordingly, during her press conference on election night, she declared an extraordinary congress and, one week later, announced that she would not run for chairmanship. Unlike in 2018, Akşener kept her promise and stayed out of the race, which took place on April 27th, 2024, among three candidates: Koray Aydın, Müsavat Dervişoğlu, and Mehmet Tolga Akalın. All three came from Ülkücü-nationalist backgrounds and had been supporters of Akşener since 2015. However, it was widely rumored that Akşener favored Müsavat Dervişoğlu among them (Sayın, 2024).

The congress started with emotional homages to Akşener and was marked by references to the İYİ Party's "epic story," as Koray Aydın put it (Gazete Duvar, 2024a). The party's established narrative of resisting tyranny and overcoming obstacles at every turn was palpable in every speech from the Congress' beginning to its end. Akşener was announced as the party's "eternal leader," and all three candidates praised her 'democratic character' for stepping down voluntarily. However, in line with the rumors, Dervişoğlu was the only candidate who went beyond courteous praise and stated that "discussing Akşener would be discussing the İYİ Party itself" (Gazete Duvar, 2024b). Furthermore, while other candidates shared specific criticisms of how the party was run, such as a lack of institutionalization and indifference towards those who had left the party, Dervişoğlu offered no criticism. Instead, he urged the party members to stay united until the party weathered the

consequences of local elections, maintain their position, and work hard for the 2028 general elections. While the race was tight, Dervişoğlu ultimately secured the majority in the third round against Koray Aydın by taking 52% of the votes and became the İYİ Party's next leader, ending the era of Akşener.

3. 4. The Issue of Locating the İYİ Party

As outlined above, the İYİ Party has experienced many ebbs and flows in the last eight years. However, throughout its existence, the one constant and never-ending debate was the party's overall political stance, which essentially revolved around the question: How different is it from the MHP?

As illustrated in the previous section, the İYİ Party's story has been essentially framed as defiance against authoritarian rule, whether from Bahçeli or Erdoğan or both. Furthermore, since its establishment, the party elite have made their intention to return to the parliamentary system and to restore democracy, rule of law, and civil liberties a fundamental pillar of the party's program and rhetoric. This 'democraticness' is considered by some to distinguish the İYİ Party from the MHP. For instance, in his master's thesis, which has been one of the handful of academic studies focusing on the İYİ Party, Melek (2022) argues that Akşener's leadership has steered Turkish nationalist right in a more democratic direction. Firstly, he claims that by challenging the leadership cult long embedded in the MHP and then convincing a significant portion of the Ülkücü electorate to vote for a new party and a new leader, Akşener has led to a democratic "institutional change" within the Ülkücü-nationalist ideology (Melek, 2022, p. 83). Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Melek (2022, p. 94) credits Akşener with having challenged the traditional discourse of the Ülkücü-nationalism and the MHP, which is "aggressive, hostile, and polarizing," fixated on protecting the nation from its inside and outside enemies, whether it is Communism or the Kurdish separatism or Gülenist infiltrations. According to him, Akşener demonstrated that the Ülkücü doctrine is capable of moving beyond national security concerns to issues such as democratic backsliding, gender equality, and social and economic inequalities while appealing to a diverse electorate with an inclusive discourse. Thus, he describes the İYİ Party's nationalism as a "revised version" of Ülkücü ideology that is more democratic and more feminist (Melek, 2022, p. 92).

Similarly, in her master's thesis comparing the nationalisms of the MHP and the İYİ Party, Akgün (2023) describes the İYİ Party as having internalized liberal democratic values. However, she argues this to be the result of Turkish nationalism adjusting to the rapid globalization of the 1990s and early 2000s and the accompanying social and political transformations. During this period, feeling culturally and economically threatened by increasing human mobility and immigration, the urban middle classes - who also prospered under neo-liberal globalization - turned to nationalism around the world, including in Turkey, where this tendency was bolstered by the unprecedented intensification of the Kurdish conflict. These educated, modern, secular, and nationalist urbanites provided a brand new constituency for the MHP in the 1990s, which had been previously confined to the rural conservative nationalist regions of the country. In response, Akgün (2023) asserts that the MHP welcomed universal liberal values and adopted a more moderate, secular, and democratic position while trying to maintain its conservative nationalist support base. However, this change proved not to be long-lasting. Abandoning its embrace of globalization over time, the MHP has returned to a conservative and authoritarian nationalism after 2015. Akgün (2023, p. 318) portrays the rapprochement between the AK Party and the MHP in this period as the turning point for the factions within the party that "were able to integrate with global values," since they saw this as the solidification of the religious conservative political line. She concludes that these factions ultimately found a new political home in the İYİ Party, becoming the moderate and liberal nationalist party that the MHP attempted to be at the turn of the 21st century.

However, for some, the 'democraticness' or 'liberalness' of the İYİ Party is not the root cause underlying the party's emergence but rather a consequence of other factors. For instance, while echoing Akgün's (2023) interpretation of the İYİ Party as a secular and urban nationalist faction that has emerged from the MHP, Gerim (2023) instead attributed its formation to the intense polarization of Turkish politics over the past decade on the conservative versus secular divide that has existed since the Republic's foundation. According to Gerim (2023), the MHP has maintained an ambiguous position and a delicate balance on this social and political cleavage since its establishment. However, as society became increasingly polarized along secular and conservative lines - represented respectively by the CHP and the AK Party - since the 2010s, the MHP faced pressure from internal factions to pick a side. A clear

choice emerged only after the coup attempt of July 15th, 2016. Owing to the strong statism in its ideology, the MHP leadership unequivocally sided with the ruling AK Party “for the survival of the state and the nation,” which later developed into a fully-fledged political alliance. Consequently, this was seen as the MHP positioning itself at the conservative end of the spectrum and paved the way for the departure of the secular-Republican faction, which then formed the İYİ Party (Gerim, 2023, p. 279).

Meanwhile, others question whether the party truly exhibits democratic traits. Cengiz (2023) characterizes the İYİ Party as a populist nationalist party, asserting that it gained momentum by exploiting the tensions arising from Turkey’s unfulfilled aspirations for economic prosperity and democratization. These aspirations, fostered since the 1980s, reached their zenith during the AK Party’s first decade in power, only to be subsequently undermined by the same party since the 2010s. Adopting a “classic populist repertoire,” Akşener has positioned herself and her party as the voice of the people while consistently attacking Erdoğan and the AK Party elite for undermining Turkey’s economy, democracy, and social fabric for their own corrupt agenda (Cengiz, 2023, p. 789). More importantly, Cengiz (2023, p. 788) identifies the party’s democratic rhetoric, its promise of returning to the parliamentary system, and its dedication to Republican values as parts of its populist platform functioning as a “regulatory nostalgia” that romanticize Turkey’s ‘democratic and secular’ days before the AK party. Furthermore, he argues that the other foothold of the party’s populism takes advantage of the people’s economic and social anxieties through a vocal anti-immigrant discourse focused on welfare chauvinism and the demographic threat the increasing number of Syrian refugees poses to Turkey.

Several other scholars and analysts have identified similar aspects distinguishing the İYİ Party’s ideological make-up within Turkish nationalist politics. Some highlight the party’s strong commitment to the Republic’s founding principles, especially secularism, along with its all-embracing rhetoric (Celep, 2018; Areteos & Angeletopoulos, 2021). Some emphasize its relatively progressive and democratic political agenda (Aktaş, 2020), describing the party’s nationalism as “optimistic” compared to the “pessimistic” MHP nationalism (Medyascope, 2021). And yet others name Akşener “a typical populist who distinguishes herself from the political establishment” but argue that Akşener’s harsh and divisive language is exclusively

directed at the ruling elite (Uzunoglu & Yilmaz, 2019, p. 105), while some point that Akşener's populist us versus them division often directly targets Syrian refugees (Erçetin, 2020). As can be expected, some of these themes are also mirrored in the party's voter profile. According to a survey conducted in 2019, the İYİ Party has the second most nationalist electorate after the MHP and is the second most Atatürkist and secular after the CHP while naming the HDP and the AK Party as the parties to which they feel most distant (TEAM, 2019). Other surveys and polls show similar findings. For instance, a 2020 survey reveals that while 36.8% of the MHP supporters state that they "fulfill all their religious obligations," only 14.6% of the İYİ Party voters claim to do so (MetroPOLL, 2020). Another study conducted after the 2018 elections gives us insights into the socioeconomic standing of the party base by showing that the İYİ Party received the highest support in the elections from Western and coastal regions of Turkey (KONDA, 2018), where the population is predominantly urbanized, modern, and economically developed (Can, 2018).

Given the recent establishment of the İYİ Party, it is expected that its political position has not yet been firmly established, and the continuous inner turmoil and frequent departures from the party certainly did not help the matter. While there are some common threads and overlaps, contradictory views exist about the İYİ Party in both academic and journalistic circles. Nonetheless, nearly all studies highlighted earlier emphasize some form of 'moderation' in the party's nationalism, especially when compared to the MHP. Some interpret this moderation as a deliberate decision by the founding elite. For example, Duran (2017) suggests that moderation and inclusiveness have been necessary for the İYİ Party to differentiate itself from its predecessor and maximize its electoral appeal, as many splinter parties typically do. Indeed, from the very beginning, Akşener (2017a) explicitly denied being a "continuation" of the MHP. She and her officials followed an ideological 'catch-all'³² strategy by emphasizing that they position themselves at the center of the

³² In 1954, observing the decline of social and political polarization around the class-based and denominational cleavages in Europe after World War II, political scientist Otto Kirchheimer coined the concept of "catch-all party" to explain the political parties dominating this new way of politics. Writing multiple essays on the issue, Kirchheimer analyzes catch-all parties with reference to their ideological stance, organizational structure, and electoral platform. He describes them as "ideologically bland" parties, following similar policies and emphasizing similar issues in a way that reduces politics to "mere management of the state" rather than pursuing an ideologically driven social and political agenda (as cited in Krouwel, 2005, p. 256). Placing themselves at the center of the political spectrum, catch-all parties aim to bridge whatever remnants of the old cleavages in societies

political spectrum and aim to attract support from all segments of society. For instance, in August 2017, during one of his interviews to introduce the new party to the public, Ümit Özdağ explained that they were located at the “national center,” welcoming patriots from both the left and the right and all political parties (Özbey, 2017). Reflecting this approach, the party’s founding committee included individuals known for their center-right, center-left, and Islamist backgrounds, though the ex-MHP members constituted the majority (see Appendix D).

In fact, many of the İYİ Party’s features mentioned above echoed the traditional Turkish center-right.³³ The party welcomed politicians and supporters from across the political spectrum and offered a unifying language and a diverse political agenda, addressing issues from democracy to economy. Moreover, it was respectful of the Republican founding principles and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s legacy. This positioning, along with the party’s embrace of labels such as ‘center’ or ‘politics of reasonable’ or ‘nationalist, democrat, and developmentalist’ has evoked the self-presentation of past Turkish center-right parties (Bora, 2015, 2022; Aytürk, 2022). The fact that the party leader, Akşener, began her political career in the *Doğru Yol Partisi* (True Path Party – DYP) in the 1990s only added to this perception, leading many to view the İYİ Party as an aspiring center-right movement. This, of course, has had certain implications in terms of the type of nationalism the İYİ Party has been expected to display. The brand of nationalism adopted by the center-right parties in Turkey has typically been liberal and pragmatic, shunning dogmatic and reactionary politics associated with the far-right. It has emphasized economic development and the ability to compete with other nations in every field as the true aim of nationalism³⁴. Furthermore, despite fully adhering to the Kemalist principles of a unitary state and territorial integrity, center-right parties refrained from

and appeal to the broadest possible electorate. Regarding their organizational aspects, Kierchheimer highlights the diminished role of party members compared to the party elite and an overall professionalization of the party activities. Notwithstanding the importance of organizational characteristics in the makeup of catch-all parties, the scope of this thesis confines us to evaluate the İYİ Party’s ‘catch-allness’ from ideological and electoral perspectives. For detailed examinations of the İYİ Party’s organizational structure, see Elçik (2020) and Canbolat (2023).

³³ The DP in the 1950s is widely considered as the first representative of the center-right tradition in Turkish multi-party politics. Its worldview and way of politics were largely inherited by the Justice Party in the 1960s and 70s and the ANAP and the DYP in the 1980s and 90s.

³⁴ One of the defining figures of the Turkish center-right, Turgut Özal, explains his approach to nationalism in one of his speeches as the following: “Our nationalism is one of not falling behind Europe, one of competing with it. This is how I understand nationalism. Shouting ‘Communists to Moscow’ is not nationalism.”

militaristic methods of assimilation and made attempts at a softer and more democratic rhetoric in approaching the Kurdish issue³⁵ (Bora, 2017; Aktürk, 2022; “İYİ Parti ve,” 2023). In light of all these, the public debate on the İYİ Party and its ideological characteristics has been overshadowed by the question of whether the party is a center-right party or an MHP-like nationalist party, which, in essence, amounted to asking whether they were liberal and moderate or radical in their nationalism.

Central to these discussions is the composition of the party cadres, which has been consistently perceived as a key indicator of the İYİ Party’s political stance and nationalism. Since its establishment, almost every deputy candidate list, executive board election, or appointment by Akşener has been the target of an evaluation concerning the party’s brand of nationalism. For instance, after the party’s first extraordinary congress in April 2018, many media outlets suggested that Akşener created a balance between the center-right and nationalists in the General Executive Board due to criticisms that the party’s governing bodies were dominated by the Ülkücü-nationalists that came from the MHP (Güneysu, 2018; Yılmaz, 2018). On the other hand, Melek (2022, p. 71) has argued that Akşener always intended to create “a center-right party that is backed up by nationalist motifs” for which Ülkücüs, too, would vote. However, until 2020, she required the political companionship of well-known nationalist figures to deflect the FETÖ allegations against the İYİ Party. Later, as the party’s profile rose, especially after the invitations from the AK Party and the MHP to join them, she felt safe enough politically to follow a center-right path and reduce the Ülkücü-nationalists’ domination in the party’s governing bodies. Thus, it was after 2020, Melek (2022) contends, that Akşener brought several technocratic figures into the party administration while ‘neutralizing’ the roles of well-known nationalist names such as Koray Aydın and Yavuz Ağralıoğlu in the

³⁵ For instance, in 1991, during a visit to Diyarbakır, the then Prime Minister and the chair of the DYP, Süleyman Demirel, stated, “Kurdish identity, we say. It is no longer possible to oppose this. Turkey must recognize the reality of the Kurds. We can no longer say, ‘You are not Kurdish, we set out together from Central Asia, and our languages changed along the way.’ We established this state together. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, two great peoples remained: Turks and Kurds. Our state is unitary, there are no minorities. We all own this country. In Turkey, citizens who speak Kurdish are the owners of everything. This is the perspective we must adopt.” This statement was particularly noteworthy, as it came just a few years after the lifting of military rule, which had actively propagated the ‘Turkishness of the Kurds,’ denying them ethnic and linguistic recognition, and the pressure of the army was still strongly felt in Turkish politics. Moreover, the country was experiencing intense military conflict with the PKK at the time, which had resulted in a surge of nationalist feelings among the population.

Chairmanship Council.

Indeed, while fluctuating, the weight of those formerly affiliated³⁶ with the MHP in the party's General Executive Board and Chairmanship Council demonstrates an overall decrease in seven years. In October 2017, half of the İYİ Party's Founders Board, which had 200 members, including Akşener, as well as the initial executive board (comprising 60 members at the time), consisted of individuals who had been previously affiliated with the MHP. After seven years, the proportion of these ex-MHP members within the executive board decreased to approximately 35%. A similar trend can also be observed in successive Chairmanship Councils, with a sharper drop from 60% to just below 40%. However, one can also say that this decline has been largely offset by an increase in the share of Ülkücü-nationalist figures without formal ties to the MHP or the Ülkücü movement in general. Among them are authors, academics, former bureaucrats, soldiers, business people, and trade union chairs who openly identify with Turkish nationalist-Ülkücü views but have opted not to pursue their paths in the Ülkü Ocakları or MHP or other nationalist parties. Some of these 'unofficially' nationalist figures maintained close personal relationships with MHP cadres and joined party activities in the past, though no formal links are evident in their backgrounds. Additionally, the İYİ Party cadres were also filled by many young Ülkücü-nationalists who started their career under the İYİ Party's banner instead of the MHP after the fallout between the two parties. Consequently, with the edition of these people, the nationalist majority in the party's governing bodies, both the General Executive Board and the Chairmanship Council, has remained stable over the course of seven years (For individual figures, see Appendices).

Despite a general nationalist trend has been evident in the party cadres, the 2023 elections have been generally seen as a watershed moment in terms of its political position. Following the elections, the İYİ Party became disenchanted with the opposition camp and chose not to join any alliance. Consequently, its previously 'moderate' rhetoric noticeably hardened, particularly towards the CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP, which was now succeeded by the DEM Party. Actually, the İYİ

³⁶ In this thesis, I describe affiliation with a political party as a traceable formal tie, which can range from rank-and-file party membership and candidacy to municipal and national positions to holding official titles within the provincial and national organization of the party.

Party's critique of intense polarization in the country and their promise to provide a third option for people suffocated between two opposing "fists" was not merely a reactionary realignment that emerged after the collapse of the Nation Alliance. On the contrary, these views have acted as the ideational basis for the party's all-inclusive rhetoric. For instance, after the June 2018 elections, Akşener declared:

From now on, our nation will see that they do not have to be confined within a binary structure, they will see that the right address is the İYİ Party, which does not pull them to one side or another, embraces everyone, unites people rather than divides them. ("Meral Akşener'den Seçim," 2018)

However, what was new was the perception of the CHP within this framework. Before the 2023 elections, party members consistently held the AK Party (and occasionally MHP) responsible for sowing division among people for their own political gain. In this narrative, the CHP was almost always described by Akşener as fellow victims of the government's demonizing of the opposition and deemed "faultless" in preventing this since the sociological realities of the country precluded the Turkish left from reaching over to the right-wing conservative electorate (Akşener, 2017a). However, this approach dramatically shifted after the 2023 elections. Arguing that making alliances contributed to polarization and made them "resemble the enemy," the İYİ Party began to speak of the AK Party and the CHP as equally corrupt entities following their selfish agenda at the expense of the Turkish people and Turkish democracy (Altaylı, 2023; İYİ Parti, 2023b).

The İYİ Party's approach towards the HDP/DEM Party displays a similar trajectory. Up until then, Akşener had employed a "pragmatist"³⁷ approach towards the HDP and its voter base, which have been a part of the opposition bloc against the Erdoğan regime despite being outside the Nation Alliance (Savaş & Zabun, 2023, p. 161). This strategy involved refraining from making openly hostile remarks against the HDP to appeal to the Kurdish voters while simultaneously criticizing the party's ties with the Kurdish separatist PKK to prove the İYİ Party's nationalist credentials.

³⁷ The extent this pragmatism could go was most evident during the 2018 presidential campaign when Akşener, unexpectedly, joined other opposition presidential candidates in condemning the fact that Demirtaş was imprisoned during his campaign. Noting that the former HDP leader had not been convicted of the charges against him, Akşener claimed that politicians, intellectuals, and journalists should not be tried under arrest and all candidates should compete on equal terms ("Meral Akşener'den Şimdiye," 2018).

In a 2021 television appearance, Akşener summed up this strategy as following:

We are not seeking an alliance with the HDP. We position the HDP alongside the PKK, but Kurdish or Turkish voters who vote for the HDP are not PKK members. All voters in Turkey, regardless of their ethnic identity, are not servants of any political party. (“Meral Akşener’den Seçim,” 2021)

This balanced approach also manifested in formal inter-party relations. While the İYİ Party, especially Akşener, tolerated the cordial relationship between its alliance partner CHP and the HDP to a large extent, it never engaged with the HDP in official capacity. In fact, the HDP and the MHP were the only two parties never invited to İYİ Party congresses³⁸ or visited during the traditional *Bayram* (Eid) exchanges among Turkish political parties. As mentioned in the previous section, the party claimed that the HDP’s open support for Kılıçdaroğlu was exploited by the People’s Alliance to portray the entire opposition, including the İYİ Party, as siding with the PKK. This frustration was also evident during my fieldwork, where party members complained that “they could not walk the streets on the campaign trail because of the HDP-PKK thing” and insisted that “the HDP thing was now stuck to the CHP, and it was time to break up.” These sentiments shortly turned into open hostility, and in a group meeting in December 2023, Akşener declared that while the DEM Party changed its name, its “love for the head of the terrorists (a moniker for Öcalan, predominantly used by nationalists in Turkey)” did not change. Accusing the DEM Party of using Kurdish people in their justification of terrorism, Akşener named them a “so-called” political party that has no political legitimacy and no place in the TBMM (“Akşener: Adı sürekli,” 2023).

The İYİ Party’s stance towards the CHP in this matter also hardened accordingly. Abandoning its earlier tolerance of the CHP-HDP relationship, they blamed the CHP for “paving the way for terrorism.” Rather than a sporadic remark, this turned into a formal campaign slogan of the party for the local elections, which told the voters that they were “not obliged to those who open the door to terror” (meaning the CHP) or “wage war on the Republic” (meaning the AK Party). In another slogan coined

³⁸ While the MHP had maintained a similar attitude and did not invite the İYİ Party to its congresses in 2018 and 2021, this stance shifted in March 2024 when two high-rank representatives from the İYİ Party were spotted among the guests at the MHP Congress. However, whether this gesture will be reciprocated and lead to a lasting rapprochement remains to be seen.

under the same campaign, the party also advised Turkish people that they did not have to choose between a “one-man oppression” and “co-chair infighting.” This, too, was a jab at the CHP. The İYİ Party likened the relationship between the newly-elected CHP chair Özgür Özel and the Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu to co-chairmanship, which has been a system traditionally used by the pro-Kurdish/radical leftist parties.

It is true that the 2023 elections proved a turning point for the İYİ Party’s tone of nationalist rhetoric, which had been credited for its moderation and refraining from overemphasizing nationalist concerns for the previous six years. That said, there are also many areas of continuity. The claim to embrace all at the center of the political spectrum and emphasis on democracy, Republican values, and secularism has systematically continued. Eventually, all was synthesized by the party in a way that incorporates the nationalist turn into the party’s established narrative, which well found its way to the candidacy speech of the present chairman, Müsavat Dervişoğlu:

They ask us, “Where you will position yourself in politics?” The İYİ Party will position itself where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Republic were positioned. They ask if we are the center of politics, the right, or the left. I declare from here that in the heart and center of Turkey lie Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Republic of Turkey he founded, and the Turkish nationalism that forms its founding philosophy.

From this perspective, based on its founding purpose, the İYİ Party will, of course, be at the center of Turkish politics. (...) However, it will never miss the struggle that must be waged. It will embrace all segments of society. With Allah’s permission, it will open its arms to everyone—Alevi, Sunni, Turk, Turkmen, and Kurd alike. We are not against political views. We are not against different perspectives. People can think as they wish and express their views and thoughts as they like. But I openly declare that it is impossible for the İYİ Party to come side by side or stand alongside those who disrespect the Turkish flag and the National Anthem. (Gazete Duvar, 2024b)

The very fact that Dervişoğlu still feels the need to clarify their position for people confused and unconvinced about the party’s place in the political spectrum

underscores the İYİ Party's enduring challenge in defining and maintaining a coherent political identity. While its emphasis on democracy, moderation, and restraint certainly helped differentiate the party from the MHP and radical right in general, their attempt to appeal to 'everyone' resulted in an ideological fluidity, a trait that does not sit well with a deeply polarized Turkish society, which relentlessly demands clear indicators as to which political camp each person or organization belongs to. Even the party's populist tendencies and anti-immigrant rhetoric do not denote a distinctive political character in the Turkish political landscape, where populism has been a "characteristic of ruling and opposition parties and politicians alike" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 39) and a strict immigration policy has been a shared position among the opposition parties, including the center-left CHP (Bakker et al., 2020). Moreover, the party's ex-MHP cadres have always remained a source of uncertainty and suspicion in the public eye to the point that Akşener has often been portrayed as struggling to temper her party's 'ultra-nationalist tendencies' inherited from the MHP and move her party closer to the center. However, how much of this narrative is grounded, especially in terms of the characteristics of party cadres, remains unknown as almost all of the limited academic literature on the İYİ Party focuses on either Akşener herself or carefully crafted party documents or anecdotal evidence based on the public statements of party officials. While I do not aim to diminish the value of these sources in any way, there needs to be a more rigorous and detailed analysis of the people who shape and execute the party's discourse and agenda together with party leaders, Akşener or Dervişoğlu. Therefore, in the next section, I will throw some light on the sort of nationalist ideology adopted by people who have served (and some still serving) in the party's governing bodies or the national assembly and explore the ways in which they conform to the image of the İYİ Party examined in this section.

CHAPTER 4

THE İYİ PARTY'S NATIONALISM FROM ITS ELITE'S PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter, I focus on the İYİ Party's nationalism as it is articulated by my interviewees. By examining their responses to straightforward questions such as "How do you define the nation?" along with similar open-ended queries about immigration, foreign policy, and women's issues, I aim to explore where İYİ Party nationalism fits within the broader national and international political landscapes.

Before delving into the analysis, it is essential to provide a brief ideological context to better understand the party elite's perspective. My interviews with them always began by asking them to define their ideological position. The overwhelming majority identified exclusively as Turkish nationalists, and when I probed further about whether they consider themselves Ülkücü as well, most acknowledged the identity but offered different ways of reconciling it with their current positioning against the MHP. For instance, Interviewees 4 and 7 emphasize that no party holds a monopoly on Ülkücülük, which they attach various meanings compatible with their position, such as adherence to the rule of law, defending the oppressed, or serving as a role model for others (Personal interview, 2024). Meanwhile, only two of my respondents used the word "center" in their self-descriptions in response to my initial question. Interviewee 3 stated that he was a "patriotic person at the center" of the ideological spectrum (Personal interview, 2024), while Interviewee 8 identified as following the model of "nationalist center-right" (Personal interview, 2024). Notably, these two individuals later resigned from the party after my research was completed, which might suggest a potential future direction for the İYİ Party under Müsavat Dervişoğlu.

4.1. Approach to National Identity

In the previous chapter, I outlined how discussions on the İYİ Party's nationalism have been threaded by the elusive concept of moderation, which imposes certain expectations on the party. Chief among these expectations is, of course, the fundamental question of how they define the nation and national identity. And, in both scholarly and non-scholarly discussions, a party's stance relative to the ideal types of ethnic and civic nationalism is often used to discern the perceived 'moderateness' or 'radicalness' of its nationalism (Bora, 2001).

For instance, as previously noted, Akgün (2023, p. 7) conducts a comparative analysis of the İYİ Party and the MHP, primarily based on their party by-laws. She characterizes the İYİ Party as a "moderate nationalist" and the MHP as an increasingly "radicalizing" actor. Within this broader argument, she later delves into specifics and suggests that the İYİ Party essentially embodies the French model of civic nationalism despite employing symbolic references to ancient Turkish history, such as its party emblem. In contrast, she argues that the MHP has adopted a German model of ethno-linguistic nationalism, particularly since the 1990s with the escalation of military conflict with the PKK (Akgün, 2023).

Indeed, in early 2018, criticizing Erdoğan's nationalist rhetoric as "crude and vulgar," Akşener explicitly stated, "Ziya Gökalp, Mümtaz Turhan, and Erol Güngör never used such language. In our understanding, such language does not represent nationalism. Our nationalism is that of Ernest Renan. It is abstract nationalism" ("Beyefendi Babasının Evi," 2018). Months later, in a speech criticizing the İYİ Party, Bahçeli alluded to this statement by Akşener by saying, "Those who call themselves Ernest Renan nationalists should know that we will remain Turkish nationalists, rooted in the Turkish-Islamic Ideal, until our last breath and our last soldier" ("MHP Genel Başkanı," 2018). This exchange does underscore Akgün's argument and highlights the ideological tensions between the two parties.

However, it is important to recognize that both civic and ethnic models are ideal-type categorizations that rarely manifest in their pure forms in real-world politics, as most nationalist ideologies incorporate elements from both to varying degrees. Even when developing the Turkish-Islamic Ideal Bahçeli referred to in the above quote during

the 1960s and 1970s, the MHP did not officially deviate from the established voluntaristic and all-inclusive legal framework for Turkish citizenship. Meanwhile, there have also been several instances where Akşener's rhetoric took on a more ethno-linguistic or exceptionalist tone, such as when she stated on Turkish Language Day in 2021, "We existed because Turkish existed; as long as Turkish exists, we will exist..." (Akşener, 2021), or when she invoked a popular saying from the Ülkücü movement during a 2023 parliamentary group session, declaring, "Just as on the first day, today, too, everything will be according to the Turk, by the Turk, and for Turkishness" (Akşener, 2023). Thus, to fully understand how the İYİ Party's nationalism extends beyond written documents and occasional leader statements, this section will analyze the party elite's views on the Turkish national identity. Do they see it purely as a legal category defined by citizenship? If not, how much importance do they place on concepts such as ethnicity, religion, culture, or language?

When I asked the elite to share their understanding of nationhood and Turkishness, their initial responses were short, direct, and nearly identical, echoing the key phrases from the official nationalist vocabulary. Without much hesitation, they quickly listed notions such as "common history," "having the same language, culture, and traditions," "living within the same borders," and "unity in goals, ideals, and feelings." While they acknowledge race and ethnicity as objective realities, the party elite viewed them as impossible to maintain in their pure forms in the Turkish context, where the Turks have been living in Anatolia for "a thousand years," intermingling with various ethnic groups and eventually becoming "so mixed up that it is impossible to separate them [from others] any longer" (Interviewee 1, personal interview, 2024). Moreover, even before their arrival in Anatolia, some elite emphasized that the Turkish people were in constant contact with different peoples. Therefore, given these historical experiences, they argue, the Turks could not have possibly become racist. For instance, Interviewee 6 states:

In Turkey, due to the nature of our sociology, racism wouldn't develop. Do you understand what I mean? The reason it doesn't develop is deeply rooted in our culture, in Turkish culture. We are a nomadic and communicative people. Racism develops in closed societies. But the Turk, look at his entire life—nomadic, able to form marriages with different communities, establish contact, integrate them, govern

them, benefiting from the members of those communities in their own governance. (...) It's an issue rooted in the experience of founding great states and managing empires, and the cultural memory that comes with it. [Racists] remain a minority. It does exist, of course, as it does in every society. There are some advantages and benefits to being marginal, and small groups do form, but it's not something that is very sustainable. (Personal interview, 2024)

The alignment of their account of history with the historical narrative crafted by the early Republican regime is unmistakable. Similarly, a few other interviewees also emphasize the narrative that Turks, historically incorporating diverse peoples into their political entities, have become inherently inclusive and tolerant. What is more, they support these claims with 'evidence,' arguing that if the Ottoman Empire or the Turkish Republic had been racist, "today, in İstanbul, which [the Turks] conquered in 1453, we [would not] still have Armenian citizens or Greek citizens or Jewish citizens" just as "you won't find anything of Andalusia in [contemporary] Spain, which demonstrates the Turkish people's "noble" character (Interviewee 5, personal interview, 2024).

This perspective is further reinforced by their presentation of the establishment of the Republic. Quoting Atatürk's saying, 'How happy is the one who says I am a Turk,' in unison, the party elite contends that the Republic of Turkey was founded not on ethnicity or race but on a voluntaristic principle - a conscious will to live together as a nation. In 1923, according to their presentation of events, Turks, Kurds, Circassians, and other groups came together in the new parliament in Ankara to declare their commitment to a Turkish national state (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024). And, non-Muslim minorities in this new state, including Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, embraced Turkish citizenship with pride (Interviewee 5, personal interview, 2024). According to the İYİ Party elite, ethnic differences were effectively "reset" with the establishment of the Republic, with each group willingly adopting the Turkish identity (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024). Therefore, the term 'Turk' ceased to denote a specific ethnic group and came to represent the nation as a whole, no longer equated with "Kurdishness, Circassianness, or Albanianness" (Interviewee 7, personal interview, 2024).

For the party elite, the ‘picture-perfect’ narrative described above represents the ideal state of affairs for all Turkish citizens. As a result, they perceive the Republican citizenship model—and, by extension, their nationalism, which they claim to base on this model—as the most reasonable path forward to the point that they are genuinely baffled by the existence of people opposing their views. And, this initial bafflement is almost always followed by the marginalization of these opposing perspectives. For example, Interviewee 7 asserts, “We are a nation-state, and in nation-states, there is a name for the nation. Let the name of this nation, which is ‘Turk,’ not offend anyone” (Personal Interview, 2024). Interviewee 4 shares similar complaints but goes further, arguing that anyone who contradicts the established framework essentially sees themselves as an outsider to the nation:

We have a name for our nation, the Turkish nation. Why would anyone be bothered by that? It’s not based on ethnicity or sect. (...) If someone does not feel a sense of belonging to this country, to the Republic of Turkey, then them even having citizenship rights. . . I mean, “I am a citizen, but I do not accept the first four articles of the Constitution,”³⁹ I do not accept its language, its flag, its anthem,” then what are you? You should be in whatever country you belong to, right? (Personal interview, 2024)

Then, the tone of the rhetoric is carried even further by Interviewee 8, who unequivocally declares, “For starters, we will first teach everyone living within the Republic of Turkey to say, ‘I am Turkish.’ This equation is that simple. It’s not about being advanced, backward, contemporary, or modern” (Personal interview, 2024). These responses underscore a fundamental contradiction faced by the İYİ Party elite, much like the early Republican regime and other political movements adhering to the official framework, including the MHP: they claim to be inclusive and tolerant in accepting everyone into the Turkish body politic, yet simultaneously demand strict conformity from all members once they are part of it.

³⁹ The first four articles of the Turkish Constitution define the fundamental characteristics of the state. Article 1 establishes Turkey as a republic. Article 2 describes the state as a “democratic, secular, and social state governed by the rule of law” and “committed to Atatürk nationalism.” Article 3 declares that “The State of Turkey, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible whole” and specifies the country’s flag, anthem, and capital city. Finally, Article 4 states that the content of the first three articles “cannot be amended, nor can their amendment be proposed” (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, arts. 1-4).

Moreover, while Interviewees 4 and 8 do not explicitly articulate it in the quotes above, their harsh tone stems from a deep-seated anxiety among the İYİ Party elite—again similar to that of the founding regime—that a multicultural and pluralist political system could threaten national unity and potentially lead to disintegration. This anxiety initially appears as the participants elaborate on their definitions of the Turkish nation. Interviewee 1, for instance, describes the ideal Turkish citizen as “anyone who loves their flag and nation, defends the indivisible unity of this nation, and follows the path laid by Atatürk” (Personal interview, 2024), while Interviewee 5 characterizes Turkish nationhood as “the desire to live together in unity and solidarity against those who seek to divide and fragment this country” (Personal interview, 2024). Then, these anxieties and fears become even more evident and intense when the discussion shifts to minority rights, particularly the Kurdish Question, later in the interviews.

4.1.1. Fear of Disintegration and the Kurdish Question

Before exploring the İYİ Party elite’s views on the Kurdish Question, it is crucial to understand the historical and political context surrounding the issue and, more importantly, the trajectory of nationalist perspectives on the issue within this context to assess how these views were inherited, reproduced, or altered by the İYİ Party.

Among all the ethnic and religious minorities of the young Republic, the Kurds posed the greatest challenge to the state’s assimilation efforts. As an autochthonous community, the Kurds had lived relatively isolated from the rest of the Ottoman state before the 19th century and remained on the periphery even under the centralizing Tanzimat reforms. Unlike other Muslim minorities with smaller and more dispersed populations, the Kurdish-speaking population made up slightly over 10% of the Republic’s population in 1927 and resided primarily in the southeastern provinces of Turkey, where they were either an overwhelming majority or a significant minority (Çağaptay, 2006). Accordingly, by the early 20th century, they had developed a certain degree of distinct Kurdish national consciousness (Aytürk, 2011). Given these factors, the Kurds presented the strongest resistance to the assimilatory policies of the Turkish state. The early years of the Republic saw several Kurdish uprisings, the most significant being the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925. As mentioned earlier, as the rebellions were violently suppressed, the Republican regime framed them as

an Islamic fundamentalist reaction, allegedly instigated or at least supported by foreign powers, in response to the modernizing and secularizing reforms. The regime vehemently denied any Kurdish identity behind the uprisings, insisting that such an identity did not exist.

Moreover, these rebellions exacerbated the trauma created by the Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920 after the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I. The treaty divided Anatolia into several occupation zones among the Allied powers and envisioned the establishment of several independent nation-states, one of them being Kurdish. Although the treaty was never ratified due to the subsequent successful independence struggle and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, it left a lasting mark on the Turkish national consciousness, fostering deep-seated suspicions against Western countries as well as any recognition demands by minorities, particularly those from the Kurds (Guida, 2008; Ergin, 2014).

Ergin (2014) argues that this early approach based on suspicion and denial turned into a paradigm that defined the state's and the larger society's views on the Kurdish Question until the 1990s. However, in the 1950s, the center-right government of the DP found limited room to maneuver within this paradigm, following a softer assimilation policy. Seeing the harsh militaristic measures as counterproductive, the party framed the issue as one of social and economic underdevelopment in the Eastern provinces, advocating for solutions through education and economic integration while avoiding any ethnic and cultural recognition. Although limited in scope, this approach set a precedent for future Turkish center-right parties (Aktürk, 2012) and paved the way for a significant shift in discourse during the 1990s. This period marked the first formal recognition of a distinct Kurdish identity, highlighted by Süleyman Demirel's 1991 speech, "We recognize the Kurdish reality," where Demirel criticized the denial of the Kurds' ethnic and cultural existence while still reaffirming that the Turkish state is unitary and does not acknowledge minorities (Ergin, 2014; Uçar & Akandere, 2017).

Despite this shift, the MHP continued to uphold the stance it had adopted since the 1960s, remaining firmly aligned with the official paradigm until the end of Türkeş's leadership. During this period, Türkeş insisted on describing the Kurds as an originally Turkish tribe that had lost its national consciousness but used this

argument to assert that Kurds were no different from other Turkish citizens and thus entitled to the same rights. Demands for additional rights, in his view, were equivalent to supporting separatism (Bora, 2001; Can, 2001; Dural, 2016). As conflicts with the PKK intensified and xenophobia increased in Turkish society in the 1990s, the MHP's stance was tested as well. Nevertheless, Türkeş continued to uphold the official narrative, distinguishing between 'people in the region' (a euphemism for Kurds) who were seen as wanting to remain within the Turkish nation and the PKK.

Under Bahçeli's leadership, the MHP's rhetoric evolved to acknowledge, albeit to a limited extent, a distinct Kurdish identity, where he carefully framed the Kurdish-speaking population as merely a cultural variety within the broader Turkish culture - one of the "colors and scents" in the "flower garden of Turkey" (Dural, 2016). In the following years, Bahçeli heavily criticized the framing of the Kurdish Question under the framework of democratic rights, which was largely shaped by the start of accession negotiations with the EU, and he was particularly harsh on the AK Party government for being submissive to foreign plots aiming to divide the country (Guida, 2008). Bahçeli's intense criticisms only escalated in the early 2010s when the AK Party government introduced the "Kurdish Initiative," a reform and peace process, which included a range of measures from granting language rights to Kurds to indirect negotiations with the PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan. For example, in March 2015, in response to the so-called Dolmabahçe Agreement, where the HDP and the government agreed on a set of principles reaffirming a democratic approach to the Kurdish Question:

AKP is now both the HDP and the PKK. Today, conditions similar to those in the National Struggle are forming again. The supporters of Sevres, colonial pawns, remnants of the occupation, and those who cheer for oppression have reopened their eyes. They have launched new attacks using concepts like opening up, solutions, peace, and disarmament to test their chances once more. Those who were repelled in Gallipoli [in 1915] have infiltrated the AKP. ("MHP Lideri Devlet," 2015)

In the post-2015 period, the MHP's stance on the Kurdish Question remained consistent, with Bahçeli frequently emphasizing the distinction between "[our]

Kurdish-origin brothers and sisters” and the PKK while also calling for the closure of the HDP, which he equated with the PKK (MHP, 2021). The key difference now was that the MHP had become a staunch ally of Erdoğan and the AK Party government, which had adopted an intense securitization agenda following the collapse of the peace process.

But where do the İYİ Party elite locate themselves in this long history of denial, conflict, and reform? Given the İYİ Party elite’s alignment with the official inclusive yet assimilatory citizenship model and their strong emphasis on preserving the unity of the Turkish nation I established in the earlier section, it is unsurprising that the party elite uniformly declares that Turkey does not face a Kurdish problem but rather a terror problem, which they overwhelmingly depict as a historical project of foreign powers.

The culprits identified range from “America and Europe” (Interviewee 3, personal interview, 2024) and the “Wilson Principles” (Interviewee 8, personal interview, 2024) to “Russia, England, and America inheriting the mission from one another” (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024), and the ever-enigmatic “someone” (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024). For instance, Interviewee 3 explicitly claims, “(...) this is an artificial problem, externally driven. It is a problem created by foreign powers to weaken the Republic of Turkey, to hinder its development, to prevent it from making economic moves, and to reduce its strategic importance” (Personal interview, 2024), while Interviewee 7 displays a perfect example of the above-mentioned Sevres syndrome:

Think about Iraq, think about Syria, think about Iran. The efforts to establish a four-part Kurdistan have been ongoing since Sèvres, a historical reality we all know. They established a certain region in Iraq. They established it in Syria. Always under the influence of imperial powers. And in Turkey, there’s been a continuous terror problem for forty years. Tomorrow, it will be Turkey, then Iran. We are opposed to these efforts because they are continuing to try to establish a Kurdish state in that region. This cannot happen. (Personal Interview, 2024)

The party elite’s concerns about an independent Kurdish state also surface at various points during the interviews, particularly in discussions on immigration and foreign

policy, which I analyze in detail in the following sections. However, one interviewee offers a noteworthy perspective compared to the rest of the elite, showing a limited acknowledgment of the Turkish state's wrongdoings in the process:

Demirel said, "We recognize the Kurdish reality." Now, recognizing the Kurdish reality is one thing. Because the state once acted as if it didn't exist. It was treated as a minor folkloric affiliation. There was no need to act as if it didn't exist. Do you understand what I mean? The state, at one point, acted as if it didn't exist, and recognizing the Kurdish reality means acknowledging, "Yes, we have such an ethnic identity." But when you say Kurdish problem, the issue changes.

(Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

Then, at another point during the interview, he also notes:

The state should send its most qualified and capable officials, its best bureaucrats, to that region. We have turned it into a place of exile, meaning that we have errors in our state practices. The officials sent there became exile officials. As a result, they treated the people in that manner, which led to the people becoming angry and supporting others, resulting in a sort of cacophony. (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

However, this tone quickly fades away when he follows with a resentful rhetoric asserting that Kurdish citizens already enjoy full citizenship rights and ample opportunities for upward mobility. This sentiment is echoed by the majority of the elite, who express it through rhetorical questions like, "What did the Kurds want that they could not achieve?" or "Are they prevented from becoming a prime minister, president, or deputy?" (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024). Meanwhile, when the issues and challenges faced by the Kurdish population are acknowledged, they are often attributed to broader societal problems, mostly created by the misrule of the AK Party government, including discrimination and human rights violations.

The elite also place considerable emphasis on the role of the AK Party government in exacerbating what they view as an already artificially created problem. Interviewee 6 asserts that the term 'Kurdish Question' was first introduced by Erdoğan in 2005 and argues that our current situation is the result of "tolerating the tribalist Political

Islamists” who have masked the terrorism issue under the guise of democratization. (Personal interview, 2024). Interviewee 7 shares a similarly critical perspective, echoing the harsh pre-2015 MHP rhetoric against the AK Party and its Kurdish Initiative:

At one time, the one who did this was the Antichrist over us. He was talking of dividing the Turkish nation into 36 parts during the process of resolution and opening. Now, he is posing as a Turkish nationalist. He used to trample on Turkish nationalism. (Personal interview, 2024)

These opinions are repeated multiple times during the interviews with respondents, reminding the perceived ‘disgraces’ from this period, such as the crossing of over 30 PKK members into Turkey through the Habur border in 2009, which was followed by a symbolic trial and their swift release or the abolishment of the student oath in 2013 (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024) and the criticisms of the AK Party’s immigration and foreign policy which the elite believe to serve the establishment of a Kurdish state beyond the border.

Overall, it is clear that the party elite’s views on the Kurdish Question are profoundly shaped by their approach to Turkish national identity, which was itself strongly based on the official national perspective. By framing the Kurdish Question primarily as a national security and terrorism issue rather than recognizing it as a legitimate demand for ethnic and cultural rights, the İYİ Party closely mirrors the MHP tradition, which also strictly aligns with official nationalism. Although there is some acknowledgment of the need for better governance in Kurdish regions, these limited self-criticisms are overshadowed by the elite’s commitment to a ‘picture-perfect’ narrative of inclusiveness and equality described in the earlier section. Consequently, the party elite does not even attempt to address the issue through the lens of socio-economic development, as other center-right parties have done.

4.1.2. The relationship between Islam and Turkishness

While the preceding sections provide extensive insight into the İYİ Party’s approach to national identity, an exploration of religion—a majorly significant factor in the evolution of Turkish nationalism since the late Ottoman period and, for some, a key differentiator between the İYİ Party and the MHP—is essential for a complete

understanding of the İYİ Party. Despite its significance, however, the elite's responses regarding the relationship between Islam and Turkishness were notably brief compared to their detailed discussions on the role of ethnicity and culture. Instead, as will be seen in the section on the elite's views regarding immigration, their hostility towards the AK Party and Political Islam is more pronounced in their perspectives on religion.

Nevertheless, some recurring themes and ideas emerge from the elite's responses. Many acknowledge the connection between Turkishness and Islam, with some noting that "the majority of Turks are Muslim" (Interviewee 3, Personal interview, 2024) or that "95% or more of the Turkish population are Muslims" (Interviewee 1, Personal interview, 2024). However, the overwhelming majority of interviewees reject the notion that Islam is an indispensable component of Turkish identity. For these elite, religion is not the defining factor of someone's Turkishness and they often emphasize the non-Muslim but ethnically Turkish communities living outside Turkey. For instance, Interviewee 4 states:

A Turk can also be non-Muslim. What would you say about the Gagauz people, right? What would you say about those living in Siberia? You should respect beliefs. Let everyone believe in what they want. There are Christian Turks. There are some living in Istanbul, and they have churches. So, what would you say to these people? Besides, faith is between an individual and God. This is my belief. Your belief doesn't concern me at all. I respect it, but I expect you to respect mine as well. Equating Turkishness with religion, however, [is not appropriate].
(Personal interview, 2024)

However, this does not mean that the İYİ Party elite are entirely indifferent to Islam. The elite generally present themselves as secular to varying degrees⁴⁰ and agree that religion should be confined to the private realm, focusing on moral and ethical matters. Nevertheless, some explicitly recognize that religion, though not a defining factor, has historically played a crucial role in uniting and mobilizing the Turkish nation. For example, Interviewee 2 highlights how the majority of Turkish society

⁴⁰ For instance, Interviewee 6 emphasizes that the state should take all necessary measures to ensure its people can freely practice their religion, explicitly contrasting his view with the strict French model of *laïcité*. However, in contrast, Interviewee 2 expresses that in a hypothetical scenario, she would doubt the neutrality of a court if a female judge were to wear a headscarf.

can be easily consolidated on religious grounds (Personal interview, 2024). Moreover, several members of the elite assert a special relationship between Turkishness and Islam. For example, Interviewee 1 reiterates the official historical narrative that the ancient Turks consciously adopted Islam because it best aligned with their character and way of life (Personal interview, 2024). Interviewee 8 takes this further, stating:

Let me tell you. We are the ones who truly live Islam. I have been in Mecca, in Medina, and in the Arabian Peninsula. For example, the beauty of our funeral prayers, the value we give to the deceased, and the value we place on our holiday prayers—these are things that adorn Islam. But we have decorated it with Turkishness. For instance, *Kandil* festivals. We have considered these festivals as a day of gathering, a point of meeting. For example, let's say the simplest thing, we have protected our sacred book and the Holy Kaaba for years. Now look, they have destroyed the protection of that Kaaba. (Personal interview, 2024)

Moreover, Interviewee 6 portrays this harmonious relationship between Islam and Turkishness as being under threat from the Islamist AK Party government, which he believes seeks to undermine Turkish national identity to further its own political agenda:

Look, twenty years ago, being a Muslim Turk in Anatolia was very important. Now, simply being Muslim is sufficient. So, in the MHP's "Turkish-Islamic Ideal," the motto "As Turkish as Mount Tanrı, as Muslim as Mount Hira," there was a notion of being a Muslim Turk. Over the past twenty years, political Islam has removed the concept of the Muslim Turk from Anatolia. Now, there are just Muslims in Anatolia. I don't see people identifying themselves as "Muslim Turks" anymore. I used to see this a lot, back in my days of Ülkü Ocakları, where people identified as Muslim Turks, and so on. That is no longer the case. What remains is just Islam because [Political Islamist outlook] was established on the basis of Islamic brotherhood. Think about the geography and also the education level of the people. A regime can come in and culturally transform you very quickly in twenty years, through various means. This is also a risk. In fact, we shouldn't be so easily transformed. (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

This sentiment is also reflected in Interviewee 1's strong opposition to Political

Islam:

As I mentioned earlier, Ülkücülük and Turkish nationalism are definitely matters of action, of sacrifice. It is about saying no to illegality. It is about accepting the supremacy of law and the Turkish state. It is about opposing Political Islam. Yes, we are Turks, we are Muslims. (...) But we are not Arabs. For us, the nation, the Turkish nation, always comes before everything else.

The above quotes highlight the most outspoken aspect of the İYİ Party elite's rhetoric on religion, that is, their strong opposition to the Islamist agenda of the AK Party. Even among party members with Ülkücü backgrounds, such as Interviewees 1 and 6, who retain some symbolic attachment to the Muslim-Turkish identity, there is a clear shift towards prioritizing Turkishness.

Overall, despite the intense academic and public debate surrounding the İYİ Party's 'staunch secularism,' religion remains a topic that the party elite, in general, discuss with notable calm and dispassion outside of their opposition to Political Islam. In the subsequent sections, I will analyze the İYİ Party elite's perspectives on immigration, foreign policy, and women's issues. I will show that, as with their views on ethnicity and religion, the party's adherence to official nationalism, intertwined with its criticisms of the AK Party, is evident across these policy areas.

4.2. The İYİ Party's Immigration Policy: Populist Nationalism?

As previously examined, Cengiz (2023) attributes the İYİ Party's rise in Turkish politics to its ability to take advantage of economic and social insecurities through populist nationalist rhetoric centered on regulatory nostalgia and exclusionary attitude against Syrian refugees. Even Akgün (2023), who essentially claims in her thesis that the İYİ Party displays a liberal nationalism attuned to universal values, adds that the party adopts an anti-immigrant populist discourse. Moreover, according to her, this discourse has become more radical after the establishment of Ümit Özdağ's ZP in 2021. These views evidently contrasts with the evaluations that see the İYİ Party as a moderate, all-embracing, and democratic force that emerged from the Ülkücü-nationalist movement. While investigating the party's populist character fully is beyond the scope of this thesis, my interviews with the party elite reveal

similar findings, indicating that on migration policy specifically, the İYİ Party elite aligns closely with the nativist populist right, with some of their remarks bordering on racism. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, in comparison to the extreme anti-immigrant rhetoric of the ZP, the İYİ Party elite remains relatively moderate in their proposed plans of repatriation, at least for now.

To fully understand the İYİ Party and its elite's position on immigration, it is essential to examine the broader political context surrounding the party. Turkey under Erdoğan has long been considered a prime example of 21st-century populism (Çağaptay, 2019), a brand of politics that itself had been built on the traditional populist legacy of Turkish right (Tekinrk, 2022). However, despite the massive influx of migration from various conflict zones into the country over the past decade,⁴¹ Erdoğan and his party's populism has notably maintained a distinct approach towards refugees compared to their European counterparts. Rather than integrating the large refugee population, the vast majority of whom have fled the Syrian Civil War, into their populist narrative, the regime has pursued an 'open door' policy framed by a discourse of Islamic solidarity and humanitarian values. Within this discourse, Erdoğan frequently has drawn parallels between the Syrian refugees and Prophet Mohammad and his followers, who were forced to migrate from Mecca to Medina in the 7th century due to religious persecution. In this analogy, Syrian refugees have been depicted as *muhacir* (which is the Islamic term used for the Prophet and his party and means migrant in Arabic), and the Turkish people have been likened to *ensar* (which is the name given to the population of Medina who welcomed the Muslims fleeing Mecca). Both Karakaya Polat (2018) and Elçi (2022) claim that such rhetoric has appealed to the conservative base of the AK Party and contained the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments among them to a certain extent.

Moreover, until the emergence of the ZP in 2021, the AK Party's dominance over the

⁴¹ As of July 2024, Turkey is home to 3.1 million Syrian immigrants living under temporary protection, according to the official government agency for immigration (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, n.d.). Additionally, the UN Refugee Agency reports that Turkey hosts a total of 3.3 million refugees from around the world, making it the second-largest host country globally, following Iran (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). However, in their extensive 2022 report, the İYİ Party questions the reliability of the government's official figures and asserts that, when combined with a significant number of unregistered immigrants from Syria and Afghanistan, there are at least eight million immigrants living in Turkey (İYİ Parti Milli Güvenlik Politikaları Başkanlığı, 2022).

media had largely shaped public discourse on refugees in alignment with their policies, a situation further facilitated by the MHP's softened anti-immigrant stance and "strategic silence" following its official electoral alliance with the AK Party in 2018 (Secen, Al, & Arslan, 2024, p. 20)⁴². For example, Balta, Elçi, and Sert (2023) reveal that from 2011 to 2021, immigration was rarely a prominent topic in parliamentary group meetings of Turkish political parties. During this period, while the CHP and particularly the İYİ Party did advocate for stricter immigration policies and the eventual return of Syrian refugees (Elçi, 2022), their rhetoric seems to have remained relatively constrained within the dominant political context. This perceived inaction on the "silent invasion" of the country by refugees was presented as a key reason for his resignation from the İYİ Party in 2021 by Özdağ himself (Özden & Çimen, 2021).

However, Balta, et al. (2023) argue that the eventual emergence of the ZP with a nativist radical right agenda based on forced return of the refugees created a new political space for expressing growing discontent with the government's immigration policy, especially as the economic situation worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, they claim that the rising visibility of Özdağ and his party has prompted mainstream political parties to quickly adapt and incorporate the immigration issue into their rhetoric and policy suggestions with greater urgency, with the most significant change occurring in the İYİ Party. Comparing the party's 2018 and 2023 election manifestos, Balta et al. (2023) show that while the İYİ Party's policies in 2018 were primarily based on international cooperation and burden-sharing for the safe return of Syrian refugees with the motto "Everyone is happy in their own home," the tone in the 2023 manifesto became significantly harsher. The focus shifted to strict measures Turkey should adopt to ensure border security and prevent the massive influx of refugees, framed under the harsher slogan, "Border is honor!"

⁴² As was the case in many other policy areas, the MHP leader Bahçeli was a vocal critic of the AK Party's immigration policy and its involvement in the Syrian Civil War before the rapprochement between the two parties in 2016. Accordingly, the MHP adopted an inflammatory rhetoric against refugees, attributing various social and economic issues to Syrians in its manifesto for the June 2015 elections (Secen et al., 2024). However, in contrast to the 2015 manifesto, the MHP's 2018 election statement refrained from criticizing the AKP's Syria and refugee policies. Instead, it merely called for improved management of the refugee issue.

Conversely, there have also been incidents where the previous party leader, Akşener, openly denounced the xenophobic language employed by Özdağ, describing it as a “medieval mentality.” Reflecting the İYİ Party’s claim to represent the reasonable middle ground in various policy areas, Akşener framed the immigration issue as dominated by two extremes: the AK Party government’s careless inaction under the guise of conscience and the ZP’s brutal discrimination against refugees (“Akşener ile Özdağ,” 2022).

Evidently, the İYİ Party has at times attempted to distance itself from the extreme rhetoric of the ZP, a positioning reflected to a certain extent in the party elite’s statements, where they would underline how rational, well thought-out, and sometimes even humane their suggested policies are. Nevertheless, despite this emphasis, their framing of the immigration issue often align with the anti-immigrant rhetoric prevalent among populist right-wing parties in Europe (Mudde, 2012).

The predominant concern among the party elite seems to be the imminent threat the immigrants pose to the demographic composition of the country. The party officials understand the changes in the population as a direct threat to the country’s security and territorial integrity and urge vigilance against them. While some of them also emphasize the ghettoization, rising crime, and the migrants’ possible links with terrorist organizations (which has been commonly used by their European counterparts as well), the prime security framing that threads the conversations remains as maintaining the unitary nation-state. In that, the party elite is worried not only about the growing presence and influence of the de facto autonomous Kurdish administration in the area vacated by Syrian Arab populations during the war and its potential to spread separatist propaganda among the Kurdish majority in southeastern Turkey, but also about the fundamental principles of the Republican regime, which is rooted in cultural homogeneity:

This is not a minor issue; it poses a significant danger to Turkey. There are regions where the demographic structure has genuinely changed. When you consider the geographical position of these areas, it becomes even more critical. For example, in northern Syria, the YPG has accepted their own Kobani constitution. They are heading towards statehood, much like the northern part of

Iraq. Our demographic vulnerability in these regions could mean losing parts of Turkey. (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

A country's demographic structure must be preserved. (...) It is absolutely necessary to send back these people whose culture does not match ours, who speak different languages, and who are from different nations, to their own countries. This is extremely important for Turkey's security. Otherwise, you cannot protect the Republic of Turkey. I mean, 10 million refugees will eventually become 15-20 million over time. Like, it won't be possible to maintain territorial integrity. *Therefore, if the Turkish state is to exist, it must exist with Turks.* (Interviewee 3, personal interview, 2024, emphasis added)

But the key point we must not overlook is that in the Treaty of Lausanne, we did not recognize ethnic minorities, only religious ones. Therefore, Turkey can't recognize any ethnic minorities anymore. For example, one of my main concerns about the Syrians is that they might demand minority rights. If you grant them that, you can't deny it to the Kurds. Do you understand what I'm saying? These people have arrived recently. At least with the others, we built this country together, you might say. But with these people, we have no such relationship. They came here, and now their population is ten million. If they say, "We are a minority in this country too, give us rights," what will you do? If you give them rights, then the Kurds will ask for the same. And if the Kurds get it, then the Circassians... What happens then? The unitary state, the national state, would be compromised again. (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

The comments by Interviewee 6 are particularly enlightening, highlighting the perceived lack of cultural connection between Syrians and Turks—a sentiment echoed by other officials as well. However, their statements reveal that this perceived disconnection extends beyond shared history and manifests in essentialist judgments about Syrian refugees. For instance, Interviewee 2 warns of the danger of the “cultural Arabization of Turkey,” suggesting that practices like polygamy are being normalized in the eyes of Turkish children exposed to Syrian families in their neighborhoods as they grow up. Additionally, Interviewees 3 and 7 employ derogatory remarks to describe the cultural divide, such as, “There are assaults on

our girls due to cultural incompatibility” or “They keep on reproducing. They don't have any concerns or problems about it, you know. They continue to reproduce under difficult conditions.”

On the other hand, as examined earlier, The official nationalist narrative, which the party elite strongly adhere to, promotes an inclusionary version of homogenization where minorities are accepted into the Turkish nation as long as they become culturally Turkified (Uğur Çınar, 2015). Keeping this and the overall inclusionary rhetoric of the party in mind, I asked some of the participants about their views on the possibility of the cultural integration of refugees living in Turkey. Their responses, however, depict Syrian refugees as inherently unwilling to adopt Turkish culture, mirroring European nativist parties' characterizations of immigrants (Mudde, 2012), which permanently excludes them from the body of the nation. For example, Interviewee 3 states that it is “impossible to assimilate Arabs” because they will not abandon their culture, while Interviewee 6 notes that Arabs “have made the places they went resemble themselves” throughout history, rather than integrating into host cultures. Additionally, Interviewee 6 expresses practical concerns, emphasizing that integrating millions of refugees is unrealistic: “We're not talking about 20,000 or 30,000 people; we're talking about millions. In this regard, it's not feasible” (Personal interview, 2024).

However, the party elite's resistance to integrating the refugees is also heavily shaped by their belief that Western powers, particularly the EU, have a vested interest in keeping the refugees in Turkey. This belief extends to the suspicion that Erdoğan and his ruling elite are complicit in this agenda and use it to advance their own objectives. Many of the participants accuse the EU countries of accepting only a few thousand refugees while Turkey hosts millions, and nearly all of them point out that the AK Party government has been ‘bribed’ by the EU to act as a “trench” blocking the immigrant flow into Europe. Some go further, refusing to believe that the refugees fled the civil war zones, citing their “visits to their hometowns for Bayram holidays or vacations” (Interviewee 3, personal interview, 2024). They accuse the government of supporting a deliberate 'social engineering' plan aimed at establishing a Western-supported Kurdish state in the region or anew Islamic Caliphate on Turkish soil or both.

It is evident by now that a potential Kurdish independence movement is a recurring concern among the elite's statements, and sometimes they explicitly call out Western efforts to influence regional politics and support Kurdish aspirations by referring to concepts such as the "Greater Middle East Initiative⁴³." Beyond these suspicions of Western influence, the party elite also harbor concerns about a global Pan-Islamist agenda aiming to change the country's regime, which they believe the AK Party government tolerates or even encourages due to their own Islamist view and rhetoric. For instance, Interviewee 6 delves into the perceived threat posed by letting in the refugees who are involved with this Pan-Islamist movement, while Interviewee 4 contrasts the government's treatment of those openly calling for the re-establishment of the Caliphate and the return of Sharia law with how it handles anti-immigrant activists who, in her view, are merely 'speaking the truth,' to imply that government supports this Islamist movement:

On the other hand, those coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan, there too, we showed. Intelligence agencies likely have significant contributions to this matter. There have been enormous, like, propagandas since the 2020s suggesting that the caliphate will be declared in Turkey in 2023, the centenary of the Republic. These young people are being directed towards here. There are like YouTubers with millions of followers. We show their videos. These are scenes from the Sultan Abdülhamid TV series. The video is in Urdu but everyone understands what they are saying. It shows Abdülhamid, says caliphate, shows the Bosphorus, etc. (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

The kids distributed something, like "if you want the country to be Arabized, you should keep voting for us." That's it. A flyer. You can call these young people and warn them politely if you don't like it. But there's a constitution, it's against the rules. Everyone has the right to express their opinions. I was shocked when I

⁴³ The Greater Middle East Initiative was presented as a region-wide democracy promotion project to combat the spread of Islamist extremism in the Middle East by the Bush administration in the early 2000s (Wittes, 2004). Regardless of its specific content, the project has been widely perceived by politicians as well as the public in Turkey as the United States' plan to reshape the Middle East according to its own interests, which allegedly includes helping the establishment of a sympathetic secular Kurdish state in the region as an ally against radical Islam.

saw it on Twitter. I thought, 'How can this even happen?' It's unbelievable, actually. Well, what injustice! People can insult the Turkish nation, our founding values, go to Anıtkabir and shout that they want the caliphate. It's outrageous. (...) They are just trying to scare us. They want a passive society. But this is the Republic of Turkey. We didn't win this homeland easily. We owe it to those who entrusted it to us, and we've promised to pass it on just as we received it.

(Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024)

Portraying the AK Party elite and their immigration policy in line with the 'sinister' aims of external political actors is another clear parallel one can make between the İYİ Party and the populist nationalist worldview. Moreover, the similarities still do not end there. In outlining the economic perspective of European nativist movements, Mudde (2012) argues that these parties view immigrants as a financial strain, exploiting welfare benefits intended for natives while also competing for their jobs. Similarly, the İYİ Party elite constantly refer to the financial burden that the refugees place on an already struggling Turkish economy as well as criticize the government for providing jobs and social benefits that the native Turkish population is denied. In almost all of the interviews, I heard the officials repeat widely circulated allegations concerning the refugee population. Interviewees 4 and 7, for example, criticize the acceptance of Syrian refugees into universities without entrance exams, a privilege not afforded to Turkish youth. Furthermore, Interviewee 2 claims that Syrians can become doctors or pharmacists without having to present an official diploma, while Interviewee 3 believes that not only do the Syrian refugees receive a regular salary from the state, but they also get free healthcare and are prioritized in hospital appointments. Although these and other similar allegations are frequently debunked by official state sources and humanitarian organizations⁴⁴, their dissemination often outpaces fact-checked versions, and the party elite's deep-seated distrust of the government most likely influences their acceptance of these claims.

Despite their alignment with broader populist nationalist trends, some İYİ Party elite seek to differentiate themselves from the most extreme elements of this movement, represented by ZP, by maintaining a relatively moderate tone to appeal to a broader electorate. Although their rhetoric overlaps in viewing the influx of refugees into

⁴⁴ For a detailed examination, see Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü (2023) or Mülteciler Derneği (n.d.)

Turkey as a “strategic immigration engineering” that aims to undermine the established regime, the most significant difference arises in their proposed repatriation plans for these refugees. For instance, in a 2023 video outlining his party’s immigration plan, the Anadolu Kalesi Projesi (Anatolian Castle Project), Özdağ (2023b) promises to “send Syrians back to Syria within a year.” He details that a potential ZP government would swiftly abolish the temporary protection status via a presidential decree, eliminate the associated social benefits, and revoke all residence and work permits for refugees. He also describes the administrative and organizational phases of the plan, where officials would work around the clock to carry out this plan within a year. And, only when the Syrians are back in their country, Özdağ (2023b) proposes to set up a committee for monitoring human rights abuses by the Assad regime, consisting of representatives from Turkey, EU member states, and Russia.

Even though the İYİ Party elite also remains resolute in the party policy of ‘sending the refugees back,’ they specifically emphasize that they have a relatively well-thought-out and grounded agenda to carry this policy out, referring to the National Immigration Doctrine, an 80-page document the party published in May 2022. For instance, Interviewee 2 explains in detail how, in this document, they see immigration as a complex and multi-faceted issue that needs long-term, rational planning rather than reducing the issue to Syrians (Personal interview, 2024). Meanwhile, Interviewee 6 refers to the specific “humane” characteristics of their repatriation plan and explicitly denounces the narratives of sending the refugees back with “catapults” or “buses,” which has been associated with the ZP⁴⁵:

So basically, we need to demonstrate the necessary cultural and political solutions and attitudes to be a great nation, alongside being a great state. We're not sending these people to Central Africa; we'll send them back right across our border.

Historically, we will live with these people for hundreds, even thousands of years, with the image and perception we've created in their minds. Our solutions should

⁴⁵ ‘Sending refugees back on busses’ is a central campaign pledge of the ZP. In a January 2023 campaign video shared by Özdağ on X, a party official is seen addressing the “patriotic sons and daughters of the Turkish nation” queuing to purchase bus tickets for refugees, who will be transported to Damascus aboard “Zafer Tourism” buses (Özdağ, 2023a). On the other hand, the notion of expelling refugees with ‘catapults’ is an extremist rhetoric frequently employed by anti-immigrant groups online who largely support the ZP; however, Özdağ himself has not adopted this rhetoric.

have at least a compassionate foundation. Not catapults or buses. We have a detailed five-step return plan, including identifying settlement areas and opening educational facilities. For example, we only return them between June 1st and September 30th, avoiding winter conditions and not interrupting with children's school. Returns are organized in three groups, with families and children in education being the last to leave. Things like that. The system is gradual and humane, containing sensitivities. It's a system designed with care and compassion. (Personal Interview, 2024)

In a nutshell, while many think of the ZP as the Turkish equivalent of European anti-immigrant far-right parties (Balta et al., 2023; Yıldız, 2023; Secen et al., 2024), this analysis reveals that the İYİ Party's stance on immigration is also deeply intertwined with broader populist nationalist trends. Although it is true that the party seeks to differentiate itself from more extreme positions, its core concerns about demographic change, national security, cultural homogeneity, and foreign interference align closely with those of populist nationalist parties. Among these concerns, the party elite bring up national security most frequently and fervently, perceiving the large refugee population first and foremost as a threat to territorial integrity before addressing other perceived dangers. This focus on national security frequently leads them to stress the importance of remaining 'vigilant,' and may potentially result in a more hawkish stance in the future, as reflected in Interviewee 3's statement: "Whatever you do, whatever concept, rule, or law you use—whether it's human rights or something else - doesn't matter, you absolutely have to protect the country's demographic structure" (Personal interview, 2024). However, for the time being, the İYİ Party elite seem to favor a relatively rational and measured approach despite the rising anti-immigrant sentiments in Turkish politics and society.

4.3. The İYİ Party's Foreign Policy Vision: Allies and Adversaries

The İYİ Party's foreign policy position has not been as popular a topic for research in the literature compared to its stance on immigration. However, the party's view of world politics and their perception of Turkey's place within it significantly shape these other policy areas as well. To fully understand the İYİ Party's foreign policy though, it is critical to analyze the party's views within the broader context of Turkey's complex history of integration and confrontation with the West.

Over the past two centuries, Turkey's quest for modernization and Westernization has deeply affected its political landscape, creating a divide between the traditional and the modern, with various political actors continuing to position them along this axis to this day. As explored earlier, the place of Turkish nationalism along this spectrum has undergone significant transformations over time, from its roots as a Western-oriented and urban modernization project during the early Republican era to its appeal to a more rural and religiously conservative electorate from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, which depicted the West along with Communism as the source of cultural alienation threatening to corrupt the Turkish nation. Nevertheless, for conservative nationalists, Communism was always the primary adversary, and they did not shy away from aligning with the West in the struggle against it, leading them to support a pro-American foreign policy at times (Uzer, 2016).

Throughout its existence, the MHP's ideological position oscillated along this division, reflecting influences from both sides. For instance, during the 1960s and 1970s, Türkeş advocated adopting the scientific and reason-based perspective of Western civilization while simultaneously being alert against the potential corrupting effects of modernization. In this vein, he viewed Turkey's alliance with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as essential not only as a barrier to Communist aggression but also as an opportunity for modernizing the Turkish military, even going as far as labeling anti-American propaganda as unpatriotic (Bora, 2001). Relations with the EU, on the other hand, held no such significance during the Cold War years for the nationalist politics. Vardar (2002) claims that until the 1980s, the MHP maintained a radical resistance against the EU and argued that their only option was integration with the Turkic states of Central Asia. However, this perspective significantly shifted in 1999 when the party became a part of the ruling coalition of the country. The 1990s saw the MHP attempt to align more closely with official nationalism, presenting a modern, rational and urban face while moving away from its emphasis on religion and overall radicalism. Within this context, the MHP supported Turkey's EU accession, which had become state policy in line with official nationalism's goal of Western-oriented modernization. Nonetheless, the party also maintained that EU membership should not come at the expense of Turkish dignity, rejecting any concessions on issues of national interest such as the fight with the

PKK or Cyprus (Vardar, 2002; Bora, 2017).

Ever within the MHP's character, the party's cautiously pro-European approach proved temporary. In the years following the end of the coalition government in 2001, the MHP readopted a harsh rhetoric against the EU. Bahçeli accused the EU of infringing on Turkish sovereignty, describing the EU's political criteria as "imposing a new version of the Treaty of Sevres" and insisting that Turkey should prioritize its own criteria during negotiations (As cited in Akgün, 2023, p. 324). Not so surprisingly, during this period, the party also frequently accused the then pro-EU AK Party government of colluding with the EU to bolster its own power (Guida, 2008; Akgün, 2023). Ultimately, the MHP argued that Turkey is not "bound, condemned, or dependent on being dragged into the orbit of the European Union at any cost" (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, 2011, p. 188). Following the AK Party-MHP rapprochement in 2016, this shift blended easily and seamlessly with the AK Party government's increasingly anti-Western nationalism, which takes pride in its Islamic heritage and aims to be assertive in international affairs in pursuit of former imperial grandeur as well as depicts the opposition as foreign apparatus planning to incite chaos within the country and do damage to the government's quest to end all Western plots on Turkey (Tekinürk, 2022).

Given this complex legacy of Turkish nationalism and its conflicting views on Turkey's ties with the West, where do the nationalist elite of the İYİ Party position themselves? How do they approach Turkey's relations with Western alliances such as the EU and NATO? What kind of foreign policy orientation do they envision for Turkey under a potential İYİ Party government?

In official party documents and statements, the party acknowledges and promises to advance Turkey's "deep-rooted institutional relations with the West" and reaffirms its place within the Western alliance established after post-World War II (İYİ Parti, n.d.b, pp. 77, 128). For instance, in its 2023 election manifesto, they target the AK Party government's recent move away from the West and pledge to "revive the high-level contacts with institutions such as NATO, the Council of Europe, and the EU to strengthen Turkey's position within Western institutions and address existing questions and perception issues regarding our country's strategic orientation" (İYİ

Parti, 2023a, p. 261). However, it is important to note that an emphasis on Turkey's "sovereign rights" and "national interests" threads through these pledges, leading the İYİ Party to make statements such as "Turkey's being under the NATO umbrella does not hinder the implementation of national policies and strategies" (İYİ Parti, n.d.b, p. 77). A similar, but more critical, approach is evident in terms of Turkey-EU relations. The İYİ Party asserts that the current accession process serves neither party's interests and attributes this failure to the EU, claiming that the organization's vision as well as its dedication to democracy have been compromised due to the "dangerous centrifugal forces from within" (İYİ Parti, 2018). Moreover, this emphasis on national interests leads the party to pursue a diversified foreign policy agenda where their aim to strengthen their historical alliance with the West is countered, to a notable extent, by a desire to establish mutually beneficial relationships with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, which they describe as the world's "new center of gravity," as well as improve relations with the Turkic world (İYİ Parti, n.d.b, p. 128).

From guarding the national interests to Turkey's commitment to the Western bloc, many of the themes examined above come up during my interviews as well. The participants accept Turkey's Western orientation as an already established path for the Republic since its foundation and have no rejections, in principle, to the official agenda of pursuing the EU membership or remaining in the NATO alliance. However, interviews also uncover underlying reservations, grievances, and criticisms that are largely veiled or softened in official party documents. In the previous section, I have already demonstrated the party elite's approach to the EU immigration policy which accuses the member states of using Turkey as a "trench." Yet, the disillusionment with the EU goes even deeper. The diplomatic critique of the prolonged negotiation process and the call for establishing a new and healthier relationship between parties give way, during interviews, to the absolute belief that Turkey will never be accepted into the EU. What is more, almost all participants see Turkey's bid for membership as an inherently doomed attempt as the EU is a "Christian Club:"

I mean, for example, I knew that we would not be accepted into the EU when I was young. I used to think, 'They won't accept us, so we shouldn't be too eager

about it,' when I was your age. The European Union is also a Christian union.
(Interviewee 7, personal interview, 2024)

So, I don't like to develop arguments based on religion when it comes to the EU, but, well, this might sound like a National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*) expression, but the EU is really a Christian club. That's how it was established. Therefore, religion is very dominant there. (...) No matter how democratic Turkey becomes, it will never be able to join the European Union. This is as certain as $2 + 2 = 4$, not open to debate. (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

I don't believe that Turkey will ever become a member of the EU. This will never happen. It is an economic cooperation organization formed by Christian states in Europe, particularly driven by religion. Turkey will not be admitted to this union. All the initiatives here are just for show. Our membership application has been ongoing for years. It's certain that Turkey is being discriminated against in this regard. (Interviewee 3, personal interview, 2024)

The skepticism surrounding Turkey's accession to the EU is further strengthened by the belief among participants that the EU, as a project, has outlived its purpose and is on the brink of collapse. For instance, Interviewee 7 describes the EU as “cumbersome” organization that could not continue as before while Interviewee 3 believes that EU no longer offers any substantial benefits to new members, including Turkey, since their sources were exhausted by countries that joined earlier such as Spain or Greece.

Despite these grievances and criticisms, the party elite do not seem to have a desire for a radical shift in Turkey's established Western-oriented foreign policy either. Ultimately, similar to the modernist founding leaders of the country, many of the participants still attribute political and developmental superiority to Europe and reaffirm commitment to ‘Western values’ (begrudgingly or not).⁴⁶ They see Turkey

46 For example, Interviewee 1 recognizes the advanced standards of civilization and law reached by the West, while simultaneously asserting that Turks are actually the ones who taught them this civilization and law. Similarly, Interviewee 2 acknowledges the notion of universal or Western values while also expressing skepticism whether the West is truly advanced, citing the current issues in countries such as the US and France. She even claims that the credibility of “those who come from

as an integral part of the continent and oppose cutting ties with EU. However, having given up hope on Turkey's accession, the party elite instead focus on developing new strategies that serve Turkey's own interests. Thus, the majority somewhat diverge from the party's official foreign policy agenda, proposing "a different framework for bilateral relations" (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024), which envisions a purely strategic partnership between two separate entities, Turkey and the EU, focused on mutual economic and political interests.

On the other hand, when it comes to the party elite's perspective on the NATO, one sees a slightly different picture. While they interpret the relations with the EU through the lens of political, cultural or economic links, the elite view the NATO, above all, as a valuable security alliance of which Turkey has been a significant part for decades. For instance, when I asked what he thinks about discussions on leaving the NATO, Interviewee 6 answered:

Turkey's military integration through NATO is not a simple matter. If you are going to govern the Turkish state, you cannot gamble with the destiny of our nation. We could exit NATO. That is, we could decide today, prepare for 20 years, and then leave after 20 years. Do you understand what I mean? But such decisions are not to be made impulsively or lightly. If you're doing this, you must have a superior strategic goal or wish to neutralize a threat. This isn't a necessity for Turkey today. (Personal interview, 2024)

The security benefit of the NATO is a sentiment emphasized by other participants as well, leading them to clearly acknowledge Turkey's place within the alliance, instead of proposing a redefined framework for relations as they do with the EU. Yet, much like their critique of EU relations, party elites also frequently highlight the 'unfair treatment of Turkey' within the NATO. For example, Interviewee 3 doubts that any NATO member would come to Turkey's aid in the event of an attack as outlined in Article 5 of the NATO Charter. Similarly, Interviewee 4 contends that NATO has not

traditions like the Inquisition" should be open to debate. Conversely, Interviewee 6 praises the sacrifices and the struggles endured by Western societies over the past 300-400 years to acquire their rights. He continues that as a result of this struggle from below, the West achieved a notable level of cultural and political development which the Turks should feel no hesitation to emulate.

supported Turkey in its struggle against the PKK as it should have. And, again, like their stance on the relations with the EU, this perceived marginalization informs the party elite's emphasis on prioritizing Turkey's national interests, a line of thinking that can be clearly observed if we look at Interviewee 4's above statement in detail. When discussing Sweden's recent entry into the NATO, which the İYİ Party voted against in the TBMM, she passionately defends their stance, portraying the İYİ Party as the sole defender of Turkey's national interests:

Look at what happened with Sweden's acceptance into NATO. We had demands. We said NATO should support us in the fight against the PKK. And what about the F-16s, the F-35s that we paid for? We said they should answer for those first, then we'd discuss it. I mean, Turkey is not anyone's lackey. This is not a discussion of 'we should leave the NATO.' We are a NATO member. [But] our interests should also be considered... It shouldn't always be 'all for me.' It should be 'one for you, one for me,' right? Aren't we allies? So, we voted no. Look at the other parties – AK Party, MHP, CHP. What did they vote? Yes. This is where we need to think. Some people constantly say, "The flag will not fall, the call to prayer will not be silenced." Those people [who actually think that] are here, in the İYİ Party. Our only concern is truly love for our country. (Personal interview, 2024)

In line with this, Interviewee 2 also balances the country's longstanding commitment to the West with its strategic needs:

We need to stay connected with Europe and the West. But we shouldn't be in a position where we're like a forward outpost in conflicts with places like China, Iran, Russia, or the Caucasus. Turkey's real potential lies in that region. There's a huge Turkic world out there. The future of the world is also in those lands. (Personal interview, 2024)

As the participants elaborated more on Turkey's treatment; however, another significant motif shaping their understanding of global politics surfaced: power, more specifically, economic power. In each interview, whenever the İYİ Party elite present their criticisms against the EU or the NATO, these are accompanied by an emphasis

on the necessity of becoming more powerful to ensure that others will hear Turkey's voice. They contend that the ruling AK Party has created an illusion of a defiant and assertive foreign policy, whereas, in reality, Turkey's influence is at its lowest both regionally and globally, and the global powers easily overlook Ankara's demands due to its weak and dependent economy, all of which is perfectly encapsulated by Interviewee 7:

When you are a strong state, you can use NATO to your advantage. We need to be strong. If we were strong, NATO would not treat us like this today. The United Nations would not treat us this way. The United States would not act like that. Russia would not act like that either. That's why we need to be strong. We need to achieve our full independence. What comes first in achieving full independence? Economy. If you are economically bound somewhere, if you have so much debt, if you are involved in so much corruption, if there is a lot of evidence against you, you will do what is demanded of you. But since all of this is distorted and misrepresented in domestic politics, everyone is in a state of illusion. Our citizens are under the illusion that Turkey, with its great leader of the century, is challenging the world. (Personal interview, 2024)

It is clear that the party elite interpret the workings of world politics and the external challenges Turkey face through the realist lens of power. More intriguingly, at other times during the interviews, this emphasis on the need to be more powerful deeply intertwine with their Sevres Syndrome, and the elite's characterization of the West undergoes a dramatic transformation from historical allies to sinister foreign powers constantly plotting to weaken and divide the country. Earlier in the text, I established that the İYİ Party elite portray the Kurdish Question as a long-standing Western-supported plot, dating back to the Treaty of Sevres, aimed at establishing Greater Kurdistan on Turkish soil. These suspicions were only amplified with the United States' involvement in the region in early 2000s with plans such as the Greater Middle East Initiative. Moreover, as examined previously, the elite also frequently depicted the immigration problem as an extension of these Western plans, posing a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and unitary state. These fears resurface when the party elite discuss their views on foreign policy, which ultimately shapes their conviction that Turkey constantly needs to look out for its own interests and increase

its power as a solution to its problems with the Western world. For example, during my conversation with Interviewee 7, where she provided the quote above, she also remarked:

Turkey must first become a regional power. After establishing itself as a regional power, it should then secure its place on the world stage. If we had been strong, could American forces or Russia have intervened in Syria in this way today? Could they have had the opportunity to establish that statelet, that PKK statelet, there? It's impossible. Turkey is dependent. Why? Because Turkey is in debt. (Personal interview, 2024)

Moreover, some participants even exhibit a full-blown siege mentality, promoting constant vigilance against 'all' external actors. Interviewee 1, for example, claims that due to Turkey's historical and geographical importance, "everyone is always attacking us," while Interviewee 8 believes that Turkey face threats from everywhere with foreign powers "playing games on our geography." Ultimately, both of them suggest being constantly on alert to thwart these perceived plans by building a strong sense of national identity and prioritizing a national foreign policy agenda. Despite the party elite's reproachful but ultimately pro-West approach examined earlier, they harbor deep-seated suspicions against the West and promote being on guard against their historical objectives. Thus, at times, the İYİ Party elite even extend their usual accusations of complicity in Western agendas from the AK Party to their former allies in the opposition, as illustrated by Interviewee 6's following remark:

You know what? The Americans need to stop trying to change presidents every 10 years. They used Menderes for 9 years, then they lost him, he went to Russia. They did a coup, right? Then they used Erdoğan for 10 years, but he slipped through their fingers too. (...) Now, all they can do is trying to exploit his weaknesses against us. They're grooming Ekrem [İmamoğlu] now. They'll use him for another 10 years, but we won't let that happen. We won't let that happen, period. They should deal with the real actors of this country. (Personal interview, 2024)

Ultimately, the main takeaway of this analysis is that the İYİ Party elite, despite their mix of acceptance and criticism toward the West, do not display defiance or call for a transformation of the international order, unlike more radical nationalist actors. In line with their moderate public stance, the party elite present a balanced approach of maintaining strong ties with Western alliances such as NATO and the EU while also prioritizing Turkey's sovereign rights and national interests. Moreover, despite their fixation on the need for Turkey to become stronger to assert its interests on the world affairs, which is informed by deeper historical grievances, their proposed courses of action such as redefining the Turkey-EU relations or developing peaceful and interest-based interactions with the East, especially the Turkic world are always accompanied by a reaffirmation of the close relations with the West, thus do not wander much away from the Western-oriented, moderate yet pragmatic foreign policy approach established by the country's founding regime (Mete, 2001). However, it remains to be seen how their deep-seated suspicions and historical grievances will influence the İYİ Party elite once in power, and whether their siege mentality might compromise the above-analyzed firm yet moderate stance, potentially leading to irrational overreactions towards or a complete severance of ties with the West and by extension a wider list of perceived internal "complicits".

4. 4. 'A Women's Movement': the İYİ Party's Approach to Womanhood under Akşener

As previously discussed, the İYİ Party's seemingly progressive stance on women's roles in society played a significant part in shaping its image as democratic, moderate, and modern during Akşener's tenure, especially when contrasted with the male-dominated political milieu of Ülkücü nationalism from which the party emerged. In this section, I examine the İYİ Party elite's perspectives on women and womanhood. I argue that while the party aims to integrate traditional gender roles, particularly motherhood, as upheld by nationalist and right-wing ideologies, into a more progressive and explicitly pro-women agenda, which was also informed by official nationalism's emphasis on gender equality, it remains too early to assess its success—especially now that Akşener, as a female leader, is no longer in a position to champion this agenda.

Nationalism is an inherently gendered political project that imagines nation as a

“family where women and men play their ‘natural’ roles” (Nagel, 2009, p. 84). And for women, this ‘natural’ role is often equated with motherhood, as they are perceived to have an innate capacity for nurturing (Courtenay Hall, 2006). Thus, while men take on the role of the head of the family, women are assigned the role of wives and mothers, ensuring the “biological and cultural” continuity of the family, meaning the nation. This division positions women primarily in the private sphere, where they are not only expected to give birth to but also raise the nation’s next generation by inculcating them with the national consciousness and ethos (Yuval-Davis, 1997). This, in turn, requires their sexual and moral ‘protection’ for the nation’s survival and dictates norms for their dress, appearance, and overall conduct. Women were to be accepted and even sanctified as long as they acted in accordance with their ‘nature’ and performed their primary duty of motherhood, while those that are defiant were stigmatized (Enloe, 2003).

As discussed earlier, in the Turkish context, the nationalist movement that founded the Republic was deeply intertwined with the principles of secularism, progress, and modernity. The founding elite sought to transform the hierarchical, religion-based Ottoman society into a modern, secular nation of equal citizens. This meant, of course, equality not only in terms of ethnicity and religion but also sex. Republican reforms granted women equal rights in education and civil matters, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These efforts continued with giving women the right to vote and stand for election, first in municipal elections in 1930 and later in parliamentary elections in 1934 (Diner & Toktaş, 2010).

Tokdoğan (2012) argues that, given the scale of the transformation these reforms brought to a society dominated by Islamic patriarchy, women and their newfound equal status with men became the most visible symbols of the new regime. The Republican elite took pride in being the ones who ‘gave women their rights,’ and the founding period has been publicly celebrated for its perceived advances in feminism ever since. However, as with all other nationalist movements, the founding nationalist elite, too, saw women’s primary duty as being mothers of the next generation and raising their children in line with national culture and the values and ideals of the Republic. To this end, women’s education was not seen as an emancipatory goal in itself as later perceived, but rather as a means to equip Turkish

women with the necessary skills to raise ideal citizens for the Republic. This perspective is evident in the statements of founding leaders, particularly Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He urges Turkish women to be “more enlightened” and “more knowledgeable than men if they truly wanted to be the mothers of the nation” in a 1923 speech in Konya (As cited in Tekin, 2019, p. 464), followed by a similar speech to a group of women in İzmir around the same time:

As in every stage of life, there is a division of labor in society as well. Within this general division of labor, women will not only fulfill their own duties but will also participate in the collective work necessary for the welfare and happiness of society. Household tasks are the smallest and least significant of a woman’s duties. A woman’s greatest duty is motherhood. (As cited in Şerifsoy, 2009, p. 177)

This attitude persisted in the political arena for decades to come. In her examination of party programs from 1923 to 2007, Kabasakal Arat (2017) argues that, until the rise of an independent feminist movement in Turkey in the 1980s, Turkish political parties across the spectrum either ignored women altogether or framed women’s education and public participation in alignment with their roles as mothers and wives. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, all parties began to pay more attention to women’s issues and rights, albeit from their own ideological perspectives. Right-wing, conservative, and nationalist parties (including the MHP) adopted a dual approach, balancing the promotion of gender equality with the defense of traditional roles for women. In contrast, left-wing, socialist, and pro-Kurdish parties embraced openly feminist rhetoric and agenda, advocating for the emancipation of women as an end in itself rather than merely enhancing their roles as mothers or fulfilling traditional duties.

Against this historical and ideological backdrop, a woman put her claim forward for the first time in 2015 for one of the most prestigious seats in nationalist politics in Turkey: the leadership of the MHP, once occupied by the Ülkücü-nationalists’ beloved ‘Başbuğ’ Alparslan Türkeş. Moreover, given her popularity at the time, Akşener was as likely to be elected as her male rivals, if not more, in the extraordinary congress that opposition within the MHP had hoped to

convene. Although her bid was unsuccessful, only a few months later, the vast majority of the MHP dissidents accepted her leadership and followed her to establish the İYİ Party.

Of course, Akşener faced her share of sexist attacks in her career, like many women in politics before her. Yet, these rarely came from the MHP dissidents who followed her or, later, from the broader cadres of the İYİ Party.⁴⁷ On the contrary, many embraced and propagated her framing of the İYİ Party as “a women’s movement” (Akşener, 2017). What is more, these views cannot be reduced to party discipline either. Examining countless statements given by party members after they resigned or were expelled across seven years, I have only encountered one instance where a former Founding Committee member accused Akşener of adopting “macho” demeanor and not displaying the “graceful” nature expected of a woman due to her confrontational way of speaking against the government (Doğrucan, 2020). Moreover, the party elite I interviewed held Akşener in the highest esteem and commended her for showing that “courage does not lie in a person’s sex but in her heart” (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024). Another of my interviewees who came from an Ülkücü-nationalist background declared, “Our national leader is Atatürk, our thought leader is Türkeş, and our political leader is Akşener” (Interviewee 5, personal interview, 2024). All of these were no small feats for a female politician emerging out of the Ülkücü-nationalist movement where women have found little space among positions of consequence, let alone being included in the nationalist pantheon after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Alparslan Türkeş.

Melek (2022) claims that Akşener’s tenure represents a significant shift in the Turkish nationalism. According to him, not only does Akşener defy traditional gender roles, but she also publicly calls out the sexist harassment she and other women face. Additionally, she openly advocates for women’s issues such as domestic abuse and economic inequality. Thus, he argues that Akşener has

⁴⁷ This stands in contrast to the experience of the only other female party leader from a prominent right-wing party, Tansu Çiller. During her 1993 campaign for the leadership of the DYP, some party members declared women unable to lead the country as they could not even lead prayers in mosques or they highlighted Çiller’s male rival’s masculinity (Arat, 1998). Although, as Kabasakal Arat (2017) notes, all political parties’ rhetoric became more attuned to women’s issues and gender equality only during the 1980s and 1990s, this historical context remains essential for understanding the ideological baggage against which the İYİ Party operates.

incorporated women and their experiences into the Ülkücü-nationalist ideology. Akşener herself asserted in her International Women's Day speech in 2022:

You will get used to the presence of women and their success in the İYİ Party government. You will get used to the presence of women everywhere, from the corridors of the parliament to municipalities, from factories to offices, from homes to streets, from fields to technoparks. ("Akşener'den 8 Mart," 2022)

Under Akşener, the İYİ Party has been a vocal supporter of the Istanbul Convention against violence against women and harshly criticized the AK Party government for withdrawing from the convention in March 2021. Moreover, the party implements a compulsory gender quota of 25% in local and national governing bodies as well as in selecting deputy nominees (İYİ Parti, n. d.a). But where do the İYİ Party elite stand? Are they proud companions of Akşener in this women's movement? Or can we see the traces of the previously described nationalist view of women in their statements, especially given that many of them were part of the Ülkücü-nationalist movement at some point or at the very least call themselves nationalist?

During my interviews, I often begin with a straightforward question, asking participants to share their perspectives on the role of women in Turkish nationalism or nationalism in general. In the majority of the responses, interviewees refer to Turkish history in some way or another, emphasizing how Turks inherently respect, cherish, and exalt women. Additionally, they frequently anchor their explanations in pre-Islamic or pre-Ottoman Turkish culture, occasionally expressing a strong anti-Arab sentiment by portraying Arabs as the epitome of women's oppression, in stark contrast to the Turks:

Therefore, according to our traditions, the value of women in Turkish society is already very high. The order in Turkish society during the Shamanistic period was like that as well. (Interviewee 8, personal interview, 2024)

Since we are Turkish, we are already a society that values women. Additionally, when you look at it within its own time when the Arabs lived, Islam was actually the first religion to give women rights. At a time when they buried women alive,

Islam accepted women as witnesses, like, gave them the right to divorce. We actually don't know this. No one reads the Quran. Everyone thinks Islam is what they hear from Arabs, they believe Islam is what the Arabs practice. (Interviewee 1, personal interview, 2024)

Because, as I said, since we do not come from a background where women are oppressed or like stoned or from the ignorance of pre-Islamic times in Arabian peninsula, I think there is no need for [positive discrimination], but rather only a need for an equal ground of struggle. (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

Here, as with their views in other policy areas, the İYİ Party elite, in fact, echoes the official nationalist narrative. Turkish nationalism has long embraced the narrative that ancient Turkic societies were egalitarian in gender relations, which was woven into the Republic's official historiography (much like its claims of inherent inclusiveness) and used to legitimize the 'granting' of social, economic, and political rights to women within its modernization agenda (Arat, 1998). This narrative highlights that Turkish women have historically participated in public life alongside men, from politics to warfare. As previously mentioned, later traditions like polygamy and female seclusion are often attributed to Arabic influences rather than the essence of Islam itself, which, in the regime's reinterpretation, does not view women as subordinate and thus aligns closely with the Turkish character..

Like other elements of Republican nationalism, this narrative of gender equality was also accepted by the MHP at the official level. However in line with Kabasakal Arat's (2017) duality argument, even when this narrative was at its peak within the Ülkücü-nationalist movement and the MHP during the rise of Atatürkism and pan-Türkism in the 1990s and early 2000s, it remained inextricably linked to women's role as mothers. For instance, in 2005, Bahçeli expressed how Turks were the "representatives of a nation whose customs and traditions place women beside [men]'s thrones" while simultaneously entrusting women with "the duty and responsibility of raising future generations and guiding them in line with national and moral values" (As cited in Tokdoğan, 2012, p. 119). Furthermore, the increased demands by nationalist women to more actively participate in the nationalist political struggle in this period, which was largely inspired by the rising political visibility of

women within the Turkish Islamist movement, were almost always balanced by their desire to raise the next *Fatihs*, *Alparlans*, and *Yavuzs* of the nation (Bora, 2017; Özdemir, 2020).

While motherhood and women's 'inherent' qualities are themes I often encountered during my interviews, the İYİ Party elite see these qualities as all the more reason for women to enter politics and take part in the governance of the country, albeit in varying ways which can best be described as a spectrum. For instance, Interviewees 5 and 9 are the only participants repeating the nationalist exaltation of women as the mothers of the next generation:

Much more important than the man, the child grows up next to his mother. The mother lays the foundations. An educated mother with a strong sense of responsibility means a Turkish Republic on solid foundations. (Interviewee 9, personal interview, 2024)

In Turkish tradition, there is respect for women. We may appear to be a patriarchal family society, but it is always the female bird that builds the nest. Mothers are very important. (...) Women are sacred because we are the followers of a prophet who said that paradise lies under the feet of our mothers. (Interviewee 5, personal interview, 2024)

On the other hand, Interviewee 9 also expresses his belief that women should be more active in every field, including politics, and he would welcome a woman who brings maternal warmth and compassion to her role in leading the country (Personal interview, 2024). Meanwhile, Interviewee 5 emphasized the motherhood of their party leader, Akşener⁴⁸, and portrayed her as their symbolic mother who unifies everyone in the family of Turkish nation. Even when she scolds them, he says, she does it with compassion and out of love (Personal interview, 2024).

⁴⁸ As Melek (2022) points out as well, Akşener has consciously cultivated her image as a compassionate and protective mother or an elder sister during her interactions with the electorate. This is, in fact, a strategy employed by many female politicians in line with Kandiyoti's (2007, p. 15) concept of "patriarchal bargain." As the public realm is seen as an inherently male space, in order to exist and operate in this space safely and successfully, women feel they either need to become more masculine or resort to painting themselves in asexual familial roles such as motherhood (Nagel, 2009; Tokdoğan, 2012). This self-framing seems to have reached considerable success in the case of Akşener, as it spawned her widely used moniker of "*Meral Mommy*," especially among the youth.

There are also participants who can be placed in the middle, where they see compassion, conscience, emotional intelligence or the ability to unify people as natural feminine qualities. However, they do not explicitly link this with any familial bond or assign sanctity to women in that regard. Rather, they see women's bringing these qualities into politics as remedies to country's many problems:

Politics has become uglier and harsher. This is because men play more power games politically, which leads them to an understanding that justifies any kind of immorality or any means to achieve their goal. In contrast, women can bring conscience into their work. I mean women have these existential advantages, differences (...) Therefore, I believe that a woman's entry into this field of governance would make politics more reasonable and accessible to broader masses. (Interviewee 6, personal interview, 2024)

On the other hand, two of the participants, Interviewees 2 and 4, who were both female officials of the party approached the issue of motherhood and womanhood in general as matters of experience instead of explaining them with reference to women's 'natural' dispositions. For them, men cannot understand and act on women's issues specifically because they cannot internalize them:

Decisions about women's maternal leave, women's insurance, and women's pumping breaks are made by a parliament where men are in the majority. Why? At least it should be fifty-fifty. When it comes to voting on decisions that affect us... I am a mother. I faced many difficulties raising my two children. You leave your child at home and entrust them to someone who has had no training. Whether you are defending a case or teaching a class at school. Can you imagine? Your mind is at home. We endured so much difficulty and we want the new generation to avoid the same struggles. (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024)

That's why Meral Hanım understands women very well. (...) I mean, you can't explain it to a man, or a man can't properly understand it. I mean, a man doesn't understand what it means for a woman to experience violence. He doesn't understand it, and because he doesn't understand, he can't explain it. Therefore,

creating that language and building that bridge becomes more challenging for them. (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

The İYİ Party elite provide diverse perspectives on women's place in the nationalist discourse, revealing a complex interplay of traditional and progressive views. However, no matter where they see themselves on the spectrum, they believe that women bring a much-needed female perspective into politics, whether through built-in capacities or lived experiences. While party officials use this to promote increased visibility for women and womanhood in public life, one can also argue that this would eventually serve the mindset that systematically assigns women to 'token' positions that have only mandate over 'traditionally female' areas of family and social policies, as it has been the case in Turkey for decades (Melek, 2022). Indeed, Interviewee 7, who had been one of the few high-rank female officials of the MHP in the past, touches upon this exact experience of tokenism she had during her time in the MHP:

But if you want to talk about popular topics like Turkishness and Turkism or other subjects, it was always someone else. [Meanwhile female deputies and officials talked about issues like violence against women and social issues]. For example, I broke that pattern back then. I said, "I'm not going to talk about these topics. You talk about them." It is more appropriate for men to talk about violence against women. It is more impactful. When they didn't give me a chance, I would go to the chairman, Devlet Bey, and ask for permission to speak on these topics. (Personal interview, 2024)

Interviewee 7 is not the only figure drawing attention to the challenges women face in Turkey. While the İYİ Party elite often extol the virtues of Turkish people in terms of their support for gender equality, a closer examination of their responses reveals a more complex picture. This discrepancy between the idealized image of Turkish society and Turkish women's experiences is crucial to understanding the party's approach to gender issues. Some of them, in fact, lament issues such as violence against women and the lack of female representation in Turkish politics.⁴⁹ However,

⁴⁹ For instance, while showing an increasing trend since 1990s, the level of female representation in the TBMM remains historically low (Mecliste.org, n.d.). The İYİ Party, despite its relatively

they either attribute these problems to unspecified culprits such as mentality and regional cultures or as with other policy areas, blame the AK Party policies in the last two decades as the real catalysts. Only two of the participants, Interviewees 2 and 4, offered a genuine critique of the patriarchal structure of Turkish nationalism and Turkish society in general:

Where is the problem in Turkish politics? In the lack of women. Why are women distant from politics? You think of asking questions, right? “You wait, let your brother do it,” “You wait, let your husband do it,” or they don’t have economic independence, or “What business does a woman have there?” This is said a lot. A lot. “Why should it be a woman when there’s a man?” Even some women think this way. But it’s not like that. A woman should not exist in politics only in name, she should be actively involved herself. (Interviewee 2, personal interview, 2024)

In both the nationalist movement and the Ülkücü movement, as well as in the roots of the MHP, and actually in the roots of the republic and in the entire Turkish nation, women hold a very important place, especially in the Ülkücü movement. I mean, it’s not like she is ever treated as second-class, following behind. It’s not like that at all. On the contrary, she is highly sanctified. But, that excessive reverence also creates an untouchable status – which I find very problematic- that actually pushes women back. Women need to be given a space for struggle as well. I mean it in the sense of making things too easy for them. They are really very special. Like, considering them untouchable can lead to taking on many tasks that [women] should be doing themselves, with good intentions. But this ultimately makes women unable to do these things over time. (Interviewee 4, personal interview, 2024)

As I argued above, the İYİ Party elite’s views on gender are diverse and multifaceted, presenting a constant negotiation between the progressive and the traditional. Thus, they should not be reduced to a binary examination. However, it is

progressive rhetoric and the gender quota it implements in deputy nominee selection, does not fare significantly better in this regard. In the June 2018 elections, only 6.4% of the party’s deputies were women, a figure that fell short even compared to the MHP. By the May 2023 elections, the percentage of female deputies in the İYİ Party had risen to 13.7%. However, this increase still left the party trailing behind the AK Party, CHP, and DEM Party.

also fair to say that among all the participants, only two (Interviewees 2 and 4) align fully with the discourse Akşener adopted during her tenure in terms of going beyond advocating for women's issues into offering a critical perspective for the deep-seated patriarchal tendencies of Turkish society. In fact, the level and intensity of this critique by either Akşener or the party elite may not even be considered high within the broader political landscape. For instance, while parties on the left in Turkey have adopted strong feminist and gender-inclusive discourse, particularly in their advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, the İYİ Party elite has remained virtually silent on the issues. Akşener, while presenting a disapproving yet peaceful approach, differs significantly from the left's more active stance. When questioned on whether or not she considers homosexuality a perversion during a 2020 interview, Akşener replied:

Do I want my child to make such a choice as a mother? No, I don't. This is my personal attitude. But should I beat the person who makes such a choice? No. I hate swinging from one radical end to another in Turkey, I'm tired of it.

(Demirbilek, 2020)

However, it is difficult to dismiss Akşener's existence, rhetoric, and the ultimate framing of the party as a 'women's movement' in her tenure as inconsequential, particularly considering the deeply gendered nature of nationalist and right-wing politics in which she operated. As Interviewee 7 notes, under Akşener's leadership, men in the İYİ Party were compelled to adhere to their leader's sensitivities, willingly or not (Personal interview, 2024). With Dervişoğlu's leadership, it remains to be seen whether the argument that Akşener steered Turkish nationalism in a feminist direction will prove grounded or whether there will be shifts in the party's discourse and that of its elite.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“The İYİ Party is not a party founded with an ideological core but it is a party founded by those who have an ideology. The İYİ Party is not a party founded after a nationalist struggle but it is a party founded by nationalists.”

Interviewee 10, Personal interview, 2024

For any student of Turkish politics, there are plenty of complex research subjects that usually bring much frustration, and, as the above quote by Interviewee 10 demonstrates, I have sought and found mine. Intrigued by the İYİ Party’s recent emergence and its much-discussed ideological position in the Turkish political arena—one that resists simple categorizations—I have devoted the past year to gaining a thorough understanding of the party. Guided by my aim to explore the ideology represented by the İYİ Party and its place within the broader Turkish nationalist tradition, I first examined the rise and development of Turkish nationalism as a distinct political agenda in Chapter 2. By identifying the key ideological fault lines across various interpretations of Turkish national identity, I sought to present an ideological landscape that serves as the basis for analyzing the İYİ Party.

I then explored the İYİ Party’s historical trajectory, from its fallout with the MHP in 2015 to its establishment in 2017 and ultimately to the end of Akşener’s leadership in 2024, addressing key discussions about its political stance in Chapter 3. Examining the party’s split from the MHP in detail, I established that the two-year struggle between soon-to-be İYİ Party cadres and the MHP leadership profoundly shaped the

self-perception of the former as a courageous and defiant democratic force standing with the Turkish people against an increasingly authoritarian AK party government and its now-ally MHP. This, in turn, affected the party leadership's decision making processes both during the 2018 and 2023 elections. However, over the years, despite having managed to carve out a notable place for itself in Turkish politics as a new political party with a relatively successful electoral alliance with the CHP and a favorable public image that boosted its standing in the electoral polls, the party has also faced a series of internal disputes and resignations. Throughout its highs and lows, the party attempted to present itself as a reasonable and moderate new option unifying people at the 'center' of Turkish politics, with little further specification on their ideology. However, the dominance of former MHP cadres within the party led to the constant questioning of the party position within and without academia and left the İYİ Party constantly associated with their former party while they attempted to build a brand new political image of themselves.

Motivated by the lack of systematic academic studies that directly go and engage with the party members beyond discussing the various labels attributed to the İYİ Party, in Chapter 4, I presented the findings of semi-structured interviews I conducted with ten party elites during the final weeks of Akşener's leadership. During my interviews, I asked a wide range of questions, trying to discern the ideological positions of people who had a significant influence in shaping and promoting the İYİ Party's political program and agenda. In the first section of Chapter 4, I conducted a detailed analysis of the İYİ Party elite's perspectives on the ethnic, cultural, and religious components of Turkish national identity. My findings reveal that the party is strongly linked to the Republican legacy of inclusive assimilation, where they vehemently reject racism and define Turkishness in voluntaristic terms while also portraying any demand for cultural and linguistic plurality as inherently harmful to the unity thus to the very existence of the Turkish state.

In the next section of Chapter 4, I analyzed the party's immigration policy. As the one area after the Kurdish Question where the party's democratic image is questioned the most, I found that the İYİ Party indeed follows many similar views with the European populist nativist parties as well as the Turkish anti-immigrant

party ZP in their approach to immigration. Indeed, the inclusive yet assimilatory citizenship framework that the party elite adhere to does not apply to the Syrian refugees, and the party elite portrays them as inherently outside the Turkish body politic. Additionally, they are perceived as strategic tools in a Kurdish nationalist political agenda supported by Western actors, which is accepted by the AK Party government due to their Islamist aspirations. However, compared to the authoritarian forced repatriation plan of the ZP, the İYİ Party elite still follow a relatively restrained and, in their words, “humane” rhetoric against the migrants and refugees. Then, I continued with analyzing the party’s foreign policy. Here, I observed the İYİ Party’s understanding of world politics and Turkey’s place within it. The party elite tries to maintain a delicate balance between its adherence to the modernization and Westernization perspective inherited from the Republic, which should be protected against the ill-advised and sometimes even sinister agenda of the AK Party government and the safeguarding of national interest against the untrustworthy Western powers. In the final section of Chapter 4, I examined the party’s stance on women’s issues and womanhood, a policy area where the İYİ Party presented the most progressive image under Akşener’s leadership. I found that only a few of the party fully elite align with the critical stance of Akşener against traditional roles for women within the nationalist ideology, with the rest of them representing different degrees of traditionalism. Moreover, with the change in leadership, it remains to be seen whether the new leader, Müsavat Dervişoğlu, will maintain the image of the “women’s movement” laid out by Akşener.

As a result of my analysis, I argue in this thesis that within the 75-year-old history of Turkish nationalist ideology, the İYİ Party elite aligns closely with the country’s official nationalist narrative, and in each policy area I examined, the party’s position converges with that of the MHP to the extent that the MHP similarly aligns itself with Republican nationalism. Framing the AK Party government as a counter-revolutionary force, the İYİ Party elite champions the political order established during the founding of the Republic, remaining steadfast in their commitment to protecting the Republican legacy in every field against two decades of divisive Islamist authoritarianism under the AK Party.

The İYİ Party indeed portrays itself as fundamentally democratic and inclusive,

while advocating moderation, careful calculation, and planning in all matters. However, their adherence to the founding Republican framework serves as both a source of moderation, inclusiveness, and secularism and of deep-seated fears and suspicions about cultural homogeneity and territorial integrity. These conflicting aspects raise legitimate questions about the sustainability of their democratic and moderate stance.

Additionally, given its self-framing as a “women’s movement,” the field of women’s issues is seemingly a progressive aspect of the party’s ideological make-up. However, the party elite reveal a complex interplay between critiquing traditional gender roles and embracing a nationalist and right-wing perspective that views women primarily as mothers. Moreover, in the absence of Akşener as a prominent female figure to champion and enforce this agenda, the party's position remains vulnerable to change. Finally, despite their vocal opposition to the divisive and exclusionary language of the AK Party, the İYİ Party elite exhibit xenophobic populist tendencies towards immigrants and refugees, with a distinct anti-Arab sentiment, which is actually evident throughout the interviews. These internal contradictions within the party’s ideology have led, and will likely continue to lead, to ongoing scrutiny of its political stance.

Beyond simply clarifying the political stance of a new nationalist actor seeking to distinguish itself from the dominant MHP ideology, this study aims to establish a preliminary connection with the broader literature on party ideology. In that, the case of the İYİ Party, in fact, illustrates how ideological labels like moderation or centrism are highly context-dependent, leaving room for the İYİ Party to identify with such labels despite all the above-mentioned contradiction in its ideology. As explored throughout this thesis, the increasingly dominant and authoritarian rule of the AK Party and Erdoğan has played a pivotal role in shaping the İYİ Party's positioning as a moderate and democratic force. Without the AK Party serving as a benchmark for defining its own ideological stance, the İYİ Party, along with other opposition parties, may revert to older social cleavages—such as secular-religious, center-periphery, left-right, or Turk-Kurd—once there is no longer an anti-democratic government to unite against. The party’s significant shift in stance

against the CHP and the HDP after the 2023 elections after the dissolution of the Nation's Alliance might be a sign of what is to come.

Furthermore, the subsections of this thesis on migration, foreign policy, and women's issues offer an empirical analysis of the İYİ Party in these fields, albeit limited, aiming to explore the party's place within the broader literatures of populism, anti-Westernism, feminism, and Turkish nationalism. I contend that studying an opposition party that comes from the nationalist right and seeks to appeal to everybody, including the conservative nationalist electorate of the AK Party and the MHP, provides a valuable foundation for further research within this framework, especially given the prevailing tendency to view the Turkish political landscape in a binary opposition between the AK Party and its monolithic 'opposition.'

Overall, as noted earlier, this study represents an exploratory effort to examine the İYİ Party's ideology from a broad perspective. While the lack of a strictly defined and focused approach presented challenges, I contend that this thesis offers the most comprehensive analysis of the İYİ Party to date that is grounded on systematic field data. However, the İYİ Party still remains an underexplored case with numerous avenues for further research. First and foremost, future investigations could benefit from a more focused and rigorous analysis of the party's overall ideology, including its stance on economic, environmental, social, and cultural issues. Additionally, given the recent surge in intellectual and political activity within the Turkish nationalist milieu, a systematic comparison between the MHP— as the traditional custodian of the ideology— and both the İYİ Party and the ZP would yield valuable insights into the evolution of Turkish nationalism over the past decade. Last but not least, the case of the İYİ Party presents several additional fields for future research, particularly for scholars specializing in party and electoral politics. The agenda-setting and propaganda activities conducted at the local organizational level remain virtually unexplored. Furthermore, the İYİ Party's newly-formed electoral base continues to be a subject of intense debate, offering rich opportunities for investigation for those interested in these dynamics.

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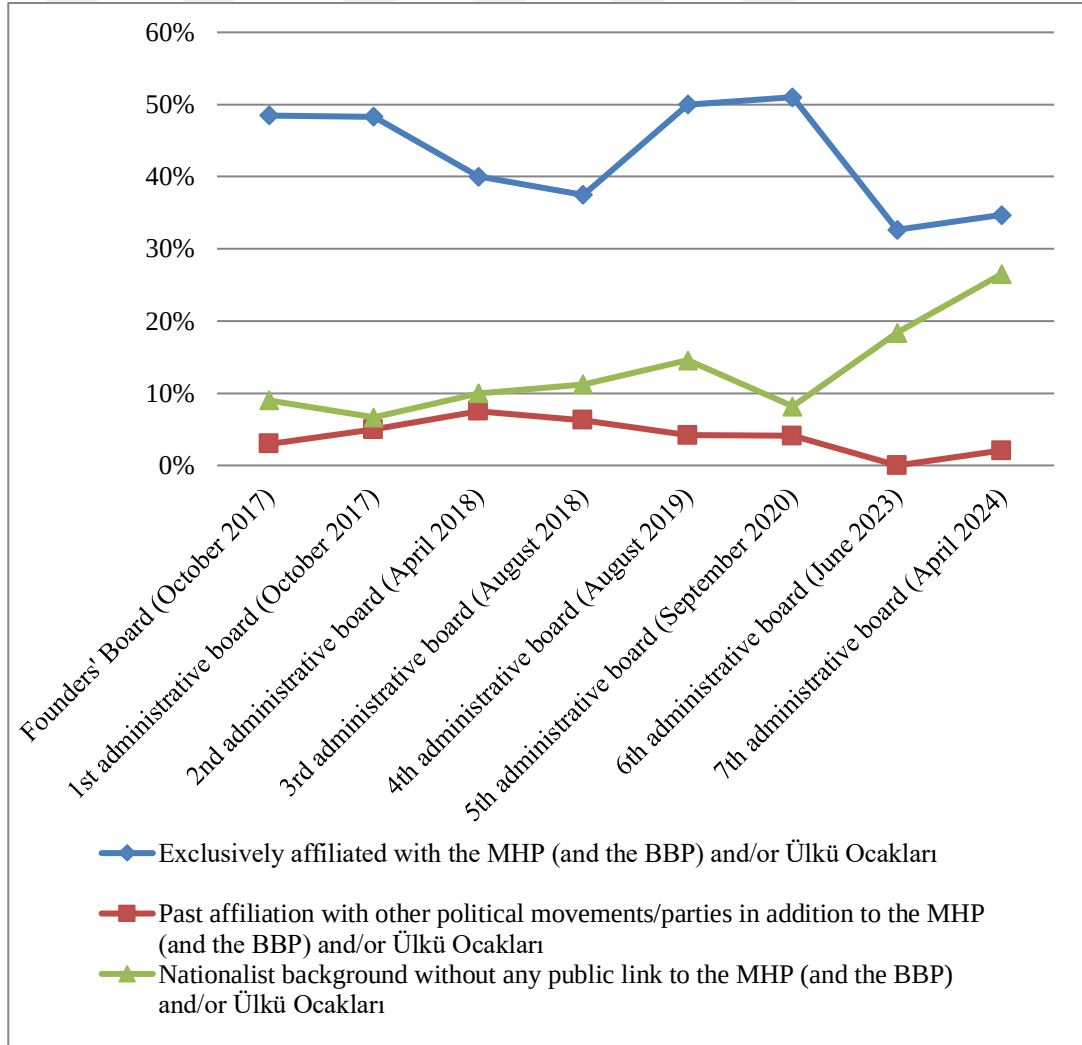
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APPENDICES

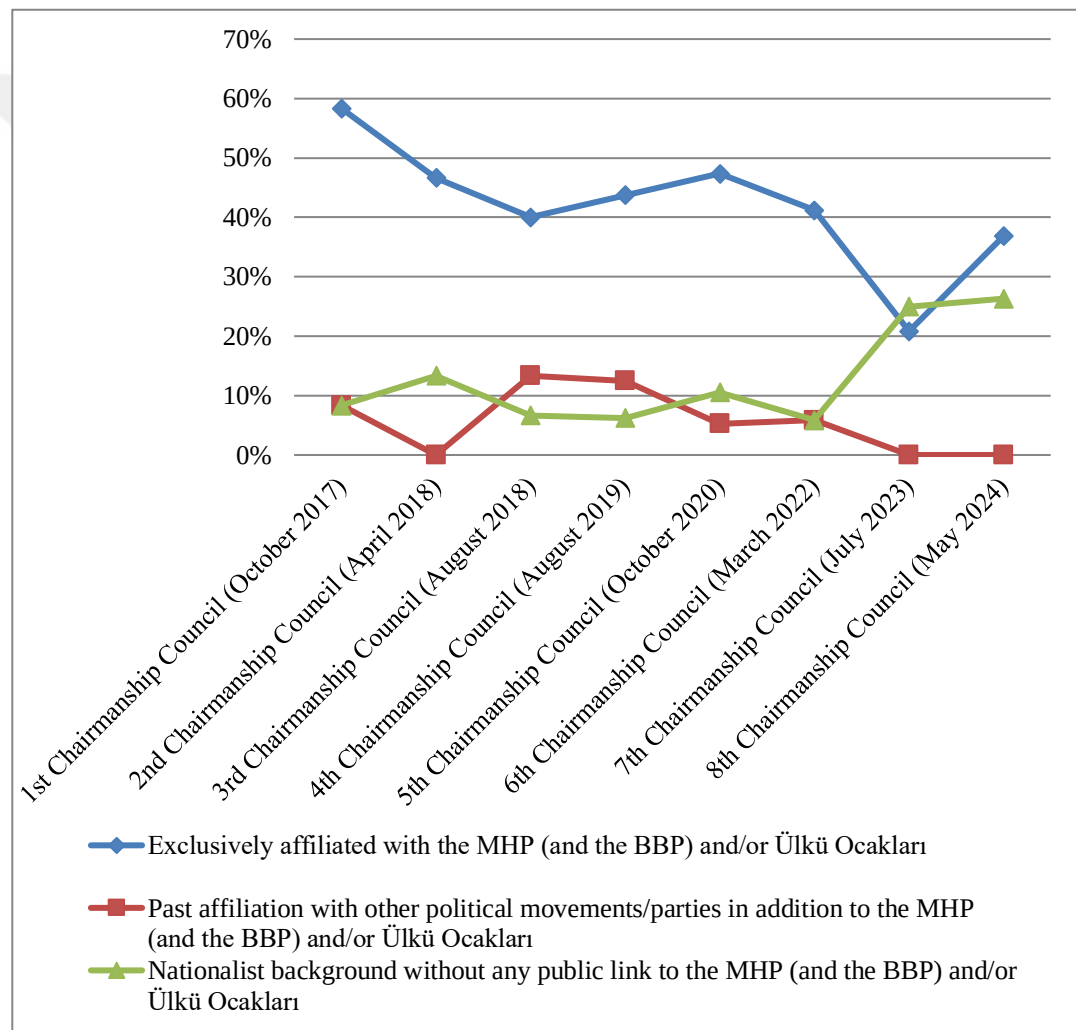
A. THE SHARE OF THOSE FORMERLY AFFILIATED WITH THE MHP AND THOSE CARRYING A TURKISH NATIONALIST-ÜLKÜCÜ WORLDVIEW IN THE FOUNDERS' BOARD AND SUCCESSIVE GENERAL EXECUTIVE BOARDS



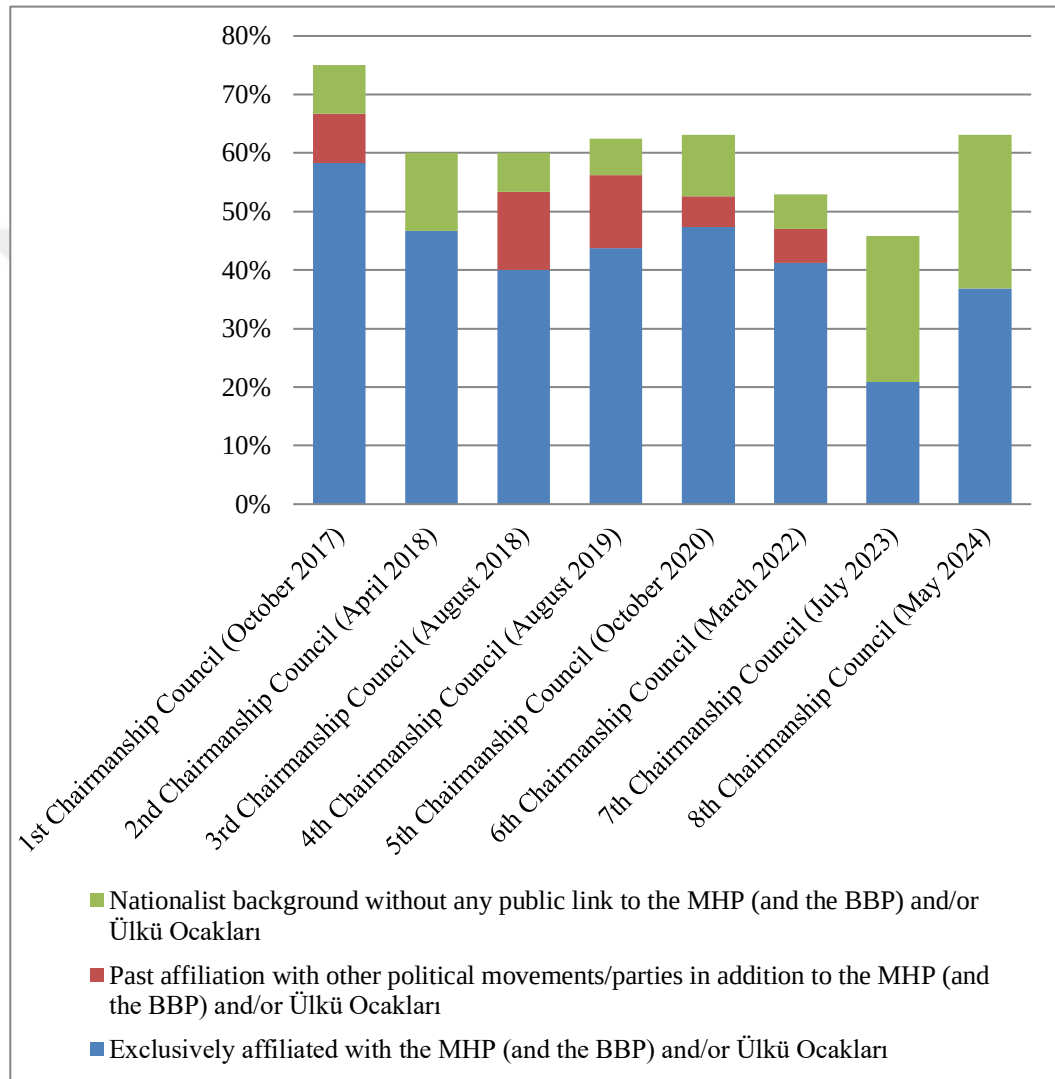
Source: The author

B. THE SHARE OF THOSE FORMERLY AFFILIATED WITH THE MHP AND THOSE CARRYING A TURKISH NATIONALIST-ÜLKÜCÜ WORLDVIEW IN THE SUCCESSIVE CHAIRMANSHIP COUNCILS

Source: The author



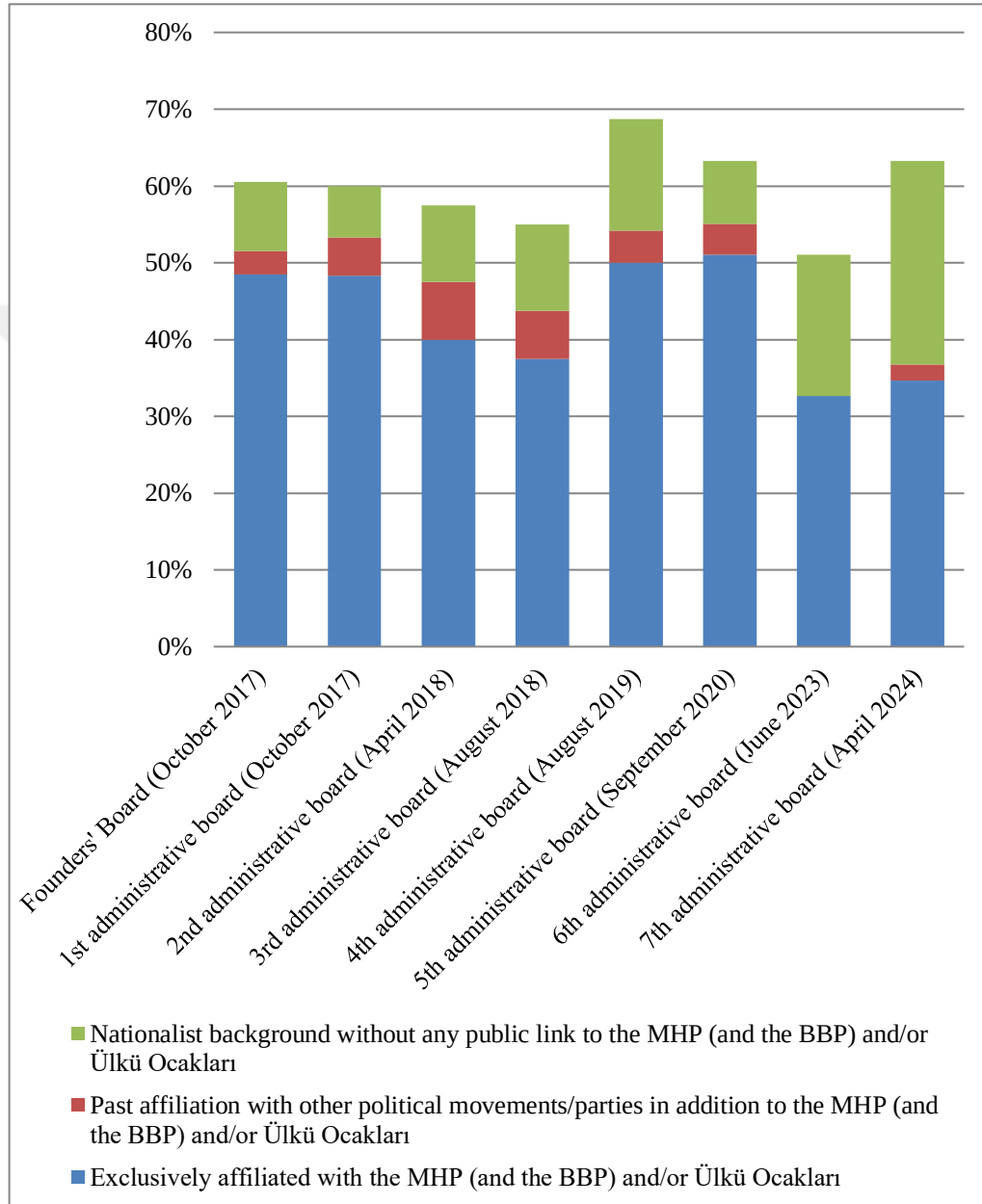
C. THE TOTAL SHARE OF NATIONALISTS IN THE SUCCESSIVE CHAIRMANSHIP COUNCILS



Source: The author

D. THE TOTAL SHARE OF NATIONALISTS IN THE FOUNDERS' BOARD AND SUCCESSIVE GENERAL EXECUTIVE BOARDS

Source: The author



E. INTERVIEW GUIDELINE (IN TURKISH)

Mülakat Soruları

Kişisel Bilgiler: İsim, Soy isim, Yaş, Eğitim geçmişi, Meslek (Paylaşmak zorunda değilsiniz.)

- 1) Kendinizi ideolojik olarak nerede konumlandırıyorsunuz? Bu ideolojik duruşunuzu tanımlayabilir misiniz?
- 2) (Eğer katılımcı daha önce MHP’de siyaset yaptıysa) MHP’den ayrılma sebebiniz neydi?
- 3) (Eğer katılımcı daha önce MHP’de siyaset yapmamışsa) İyi Parti’ye katılma sürecinizi kısaca anlatabilir misiniz? Siyaset yapmak için neden İyi Parti’yi seçtiniz?
- 4) Sizce İyi Parti’yi MHP’den ayıran şey nedir?
- 5) Size göre millet nedir? Kimlerden oluşur? Milleti millet yapan şeyler nelerdir? Sizce Türk kimdir?
- 6) Dini inanç Türklüğün bir parçası mıdır?
- 7) Sizce iyi bir vatandaş tanımı nedir?
- 8) Devleti nasıl tanımlarsınız? Sizce Türkiye’de devlet ile millet arasında nasıl bir ilişki vardır ya da olmalıdır?
- 9) Sizce kadınların Türk milliyetçisi/ülkücü hareketteki veya genel olarak milliyetçi düşüncedeki yeri nedir? Sizce bir kadın neden İyi Parti’de siyaset yapmalı/İyi Parti’ye oy vermeli?
- 10) Türkiye’nin mevcut göç politikasını nasıl değerlendirirsiniz? Göçmenlerin Türk toplumuna entegre edilmesi hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
- 11) “Kürt sorunu” ibaresi size ne ifade ediyor? Sizce Kürt sorunu nedir?
- 12) Türkiye’nin dünya siyasetinde ve kendi coğrafyasında mevcut rolü nedir? Ne olmalıdır?
- 13) Türkiye AB’nin bir parçası olmalı mıdır?
- 14) Türkiye NATO’nun bir parçası olmalı mıdır?